

COLLEGE FOOTBALL PREVIEW



Ready to Rumble!

Jim Harbaugh and his Michigan men put on their big-boy pants to take on the Buckeyes

BY BRETT FORREST

The Bucks Top Here

Playoff-bound on New Year's Eve

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EXCLUSIVE

The Confession of Arian Foster

"I don't believe there's a God."

BY TIM KEOWN



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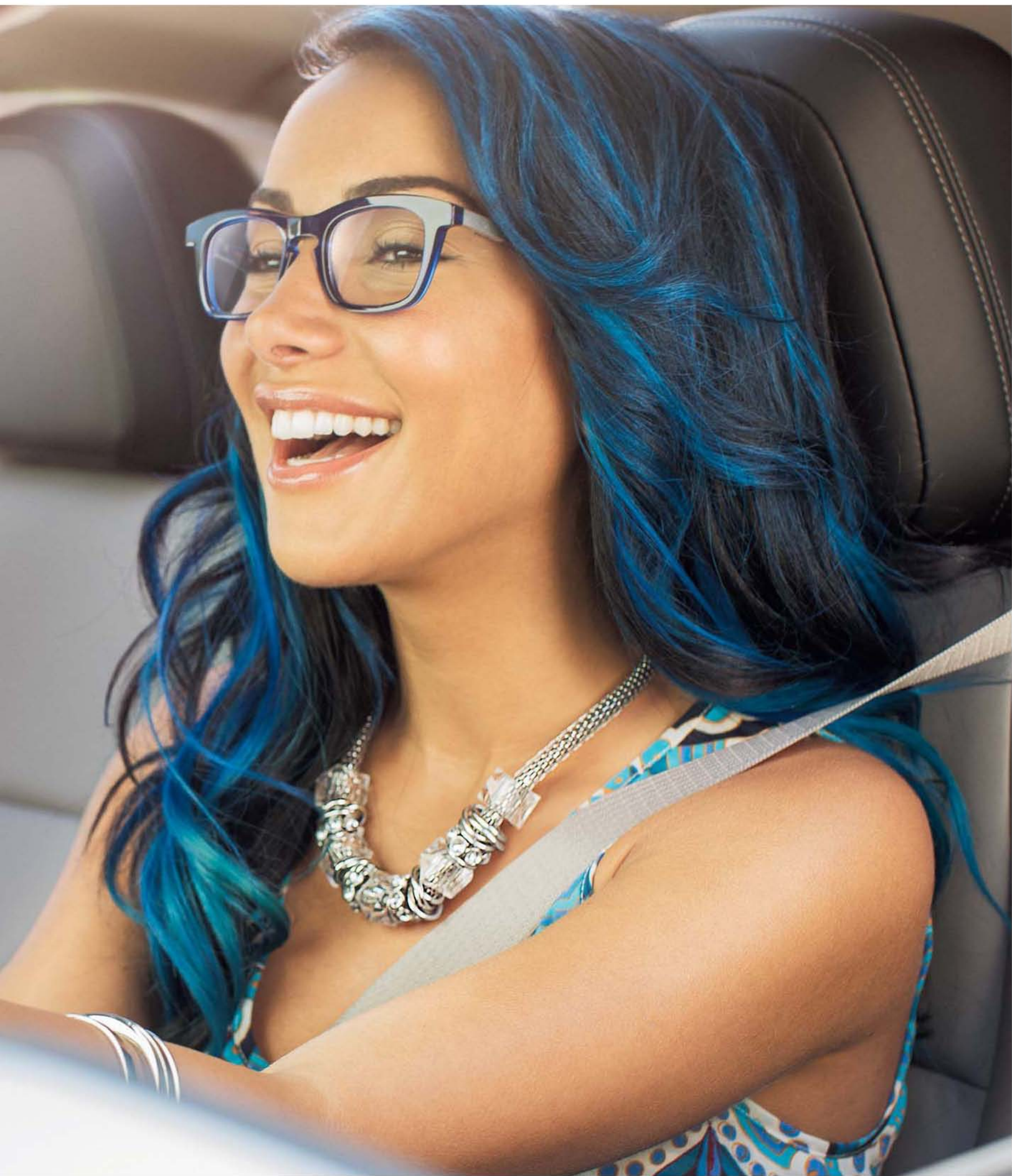
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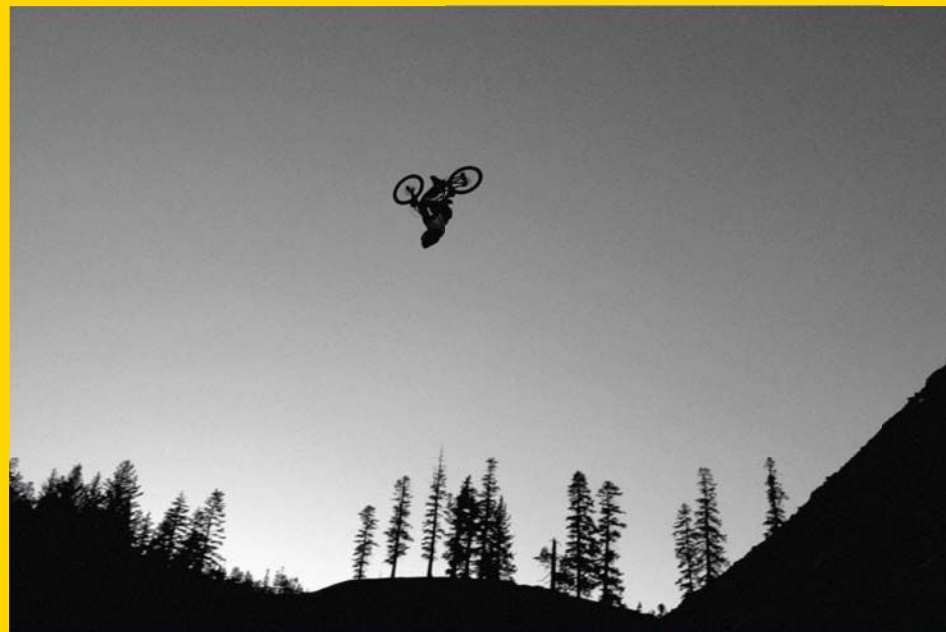
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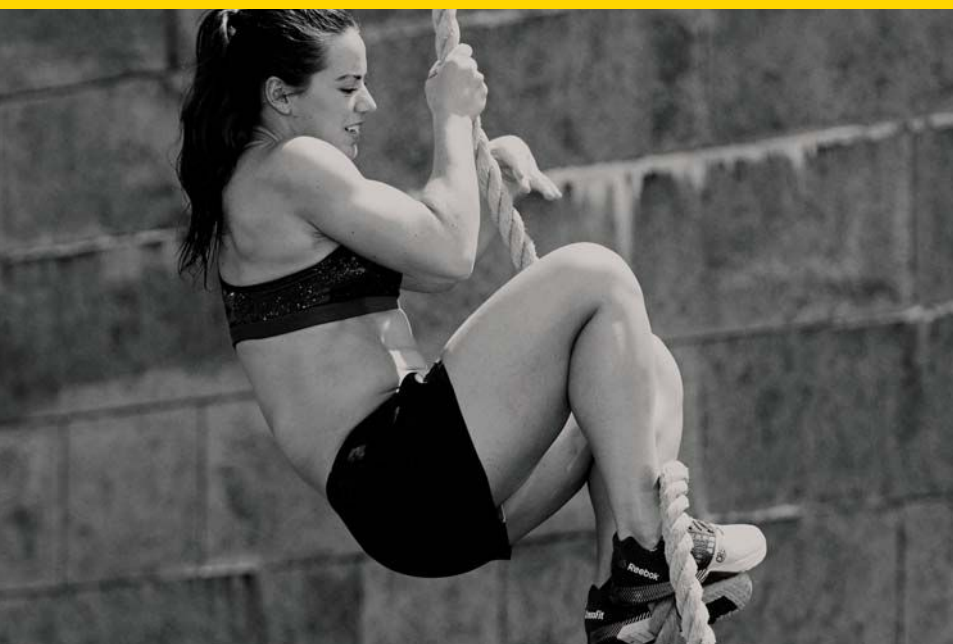


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Freeman lead our
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COLLEGE FOOTBALL PREVIEW 2015

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No one will ever confuse Jim Harbaugh for Urban Meyer, but as a rivalry begins, the two adversaries discover some surprising links. BY BRETT FORREST

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If you complain about the Sixers, don't miss sports' worst tankers: teams in the WNBA. BY PETER KEATING

104 THE TRUTH

Most athletes talk trash. Only some are judged for it. BY HOWARD BRYANT

► Also look for our **SEC Week-by-Week Guide** (following page 68) and **Ultimate Daily Fantasy Guide** (following page 82) to get you primed for the upcoming SEC and NFL seasons.



The Odd Couple

Photographer Ben Sklar on shooting Baylor's biggest Bears: "I wanted them to get into the shoot and show their spirit. [Defensive end] Shawn Oakman was a goofball and kept talking about eating running backs. But [tight end] LaQuan McGowan was very serious. I asked if they hang out off the field, and Shawn called out LaQuan. He goes, 'Big sexy here is a loner. He just hangs out with his girlfriend.' And then, of course, they went back and forth. But Shawn is the instigator. He was like, 'Let me jump on your shoulders! Catch me!' And LaQuan, in a low, serious voice, is like, 'Man, I don't wanna do that.' But once the ball started rolling, they had fun with it. They're the guys who aren't normally in the spotlight. So it was cool to let them shine." MORE ON PAGE 90

McGowan (standing) and Oakman remind Sklar that everything is bigger in Texas.

Senior writer Tim Keown on getting stood up by Arian Foster



"I knocked on Arian's door, and his mom answered. She didn't know who I was or why I was there—or when her son would be back. I felt like a kid looking for a friend to play catch. I said I'd

wait in the car, but she invited me in. Adults were cooking or watching hoops, while kids played on a jungle gym. After 20 minutes, Arian arrived and prefaced our conversation by saying, 'I'll give you all the gems you want, man.' Nothing in his home suggested he had anything to do with sports. But there was a note in Sharpie on the stainless steel fridge: 'When in doubt, eat half.'" MORE ON PAGE 15

Analytics writer Sharon Katz on the accuracy of the Football Power Index



"FPI has nailed 75 percent of FBS games since '05. So yeah, better than your average sharp. Instead of just presenting a team's percent chance to win this year, *The Mag* asked me to be the voice

of preseason FPI. Still, as with any metric, it gets better as the data gets deeper. For instance, FPI says No. 3 Auburn has only a 29 percent shot at No. 14 LSU. FPI will adjust as we see if Auburn's new QB, Jeremy Johnson, is as good as Nick Marshall [page 88] and if D-coordinator Will Muschamp has the same success he had at Texas. For a sure bet, just tell folks you like the Tigers." MORE ON PAGE 56

Senior writer Brett Forrest on crossing enemy lines in Columbus



"Walking to Urban Meyer's office, I put my arm around the Ohio State PR guy, Jerry Emig, and said, 'I have to come clean. I went to Michigan.' His eyes about popped out of his head. He said, 'You mean to tell

me we've been setting this up for three months and you tell me now?' He has the equipment manager find me an OSU pullover and demands I wear it. 'Now you look good!' he says. Then we meet Urban, who looks at me sort of funny. I keep waiting for Jerry to give me up. But he doesn't. I think it may have put Meyer in the mood to have the right, open-minded conversation." MORE ON PAGE 44

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Roethlisberger ranked sixth in the NFL with a 72.1 QBR last season.

Biggest Risers in the 2015 QB Tier Rankings

In his annual preseason poll of coaches and front office types, ESPN Insider Mike Sando asked 35 experts to place every team's QB in one of five tiers. Here's what they say about the four passers whose stock is rising the most.

Ben Roethlisberger Pittsburgh Steelers

AVG. 2014 TIER **1.85**
AVG. 2015 TIER **1.37**
CHANGE **25.7%**

"He's back to standing there, shrugging off the blitz, sliding over, making the pass, over and over. He threw for 340 yards with six touchdowns in a win over Baltimore. When you can do that against what has been a good defense historically, that is a 1—and I don't want to play him."

Andrew Luck Indianapolis Colts

AVG. 2014 TIER **1.5**
AVG. 2015 TIER **1.14**
CHANGE **23.8%**

"Luck didn't get a 1 from everybody? You want to talk about a guy who makes the team? He is Michael Jordan. Their defense sucks. Every game, he has to outscore everybody. He is the epitome of a 1. If I were to draft tomorrow any player in the NFL, it would be Andrew Luck one, Aaron Rodgers two."

Russell Wilson Seattle Seahawks

AVG. 2014 TIER **2.23**
AVG. 2015 TIER **1.71**
CHANGE **23.2%**

"At day's end, the won-lost record of your quarterback and his leadership go hand in hand. Wilson has been in the last two Super Bowls. You can say all you want about the defense, but the Bills had a good defense the last two years. What did it get them? Wilson has that late-game magic."

Tony Romo Dallas Cowboys

AVG. 2014 TIER **2.23**
AVG. 2015 TIER **1.83**
CHANGE **18%**

"No doubt, he's a top-seven QB. What Dallas did was perfect for him last year: a strong run game and creating space for people. Romo finds targets and makes all the throws. He had only one recent year with a ton of interceptions. He threw inopportune picks, but not like Jay Cutler, where he makes 15 per season."

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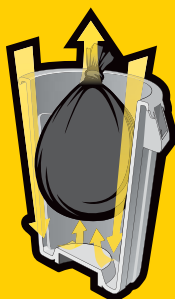
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THE NUMBERS



BY
PETER
KEATING



Basketball's biggest tanking problem There's almost no question that some WNBA teams are losing on purpose. The real question is what to do about it.



Tanking is pandemic in the NBA; we all know that. But the incentives for bad teams to keep losing are far greater in the league's sister outfit. And as the WNBA season enters its second half, we should expect to see three races: for playoff spots in the Eastern and Western conferences—and to the bottom of the overall standings.

WNBA teams trying to improve face a series of stark costs and benefits. A very small number of women are dominant at the college level each year. They have massive impacts on the pro game and make the first few picks in the WNBA draft extremely valuable. Over the past 10 years, WNBA rookies of the year have led their teams to an average immediate improvement of 6.5 games in a 34-game schedule. What's more: Nine of those ROYs were among the draft's first three selections. In contrast, NBA rookies of the year over that same span improved their teams by an average of just one game in their first season, and only five were top-three picks.

In 2008, the Sparks drafted Candace Parker No. 1 overall after going 10–24. She became league MVP, and LA improved to 20–14. In 2011, Minnesota took Maya Moore with the first pick and went from 13–21 to 27–7 and a title. The lesson is clear—and clearer than in any other league: A top draft choice can immediately turn around a bad club.

Meanwhile, there's little downside to a WNBA pick who happens to go bust. Whoever gets drafted first in 2016 will earn approximately \$50,000—or one-ninetieth of what it cost the Raptors to sign Andrea Bargnani, the NBA's No. 1 overall pick in 2006. The WNBA collective bargaining agreement caps entire team payrolls at about \$900,000 a year.

And there aren't many ways a WNBA team can improve beyond the draft. Under league rules, each franchise can designate one "core" player, giving her a guaranteed maximum contract in exchange for exclusive negotiating rights. As a result, free agency in the WNBA is much more like the NFL than the NBA: Big stars generally re-up with their own clubs instead of getting the chance to test the market. To shake loose from a team that doesn't want to let her go, a WNBA veteran basically has to refuse to play, the way Tina Charles controversially forced Connecticut to trade her in 2014.

Suppose, then, you are running the Sparks or the Stars or the Storm (combined record: 13–38 through the All-Star break). And here's the likely No. 1 pick next year:

Breanna Stewart of UConn, two-time AP player of the year and three-time Most Outstanding Player of the Final Four. Exactly why are you supposed to fight to finish 10 games under .500, when finishing 20 below could bring you the WNBA's Kevin Durant?

One answer is the lottery. But the WNBA lottery includes only four teams and still offers the team with the worst record the most pingpong balls. So the club that finishes dead last has a 44.2 percent chance to pick first, versus 25 percent in the NBA.

Phoenix understood the big picture in 2012. With a raft of key players already injured, the Mercury played Diana Taurasi sparingly after the Summer Olympics and cratered to a 7–27 record. Phoenix then drafted first in 2013, took Brittney Griner, made the playoffs in 2013 and won a championship last season.

The WNBA probably will revise its lottery rules to reduce rewards for losing. But long-term forces are pushing in the opposite direction. Many women play overseas virtually year-round, which can be exhausting. As a result, Parker has skipped the first half of this WNBA season to rest; Taurasi is sitting out the entire summer at the request of UMMC Ekaterinburg, her team in the Russian Premier League. As long as an athlete like Taurasi can make about \$1.5 million a year in Russia but barely \$100,000 a year in the WNBA, president Laurel Richie & Co.—who didn't respond to questions for this column—are going to have a fundamental problem keeping the world's top talent playing in the U.S. And if WNBA franchises know in advance that their superstars are taking leave, they will be sorely tempted to tank whole seasons from the beginning.

I don't like tanking. It shortchanges fans. It can affect playoff races. And it can't be good for player development. But in the WNBA, it's the smartest way to rebuild.



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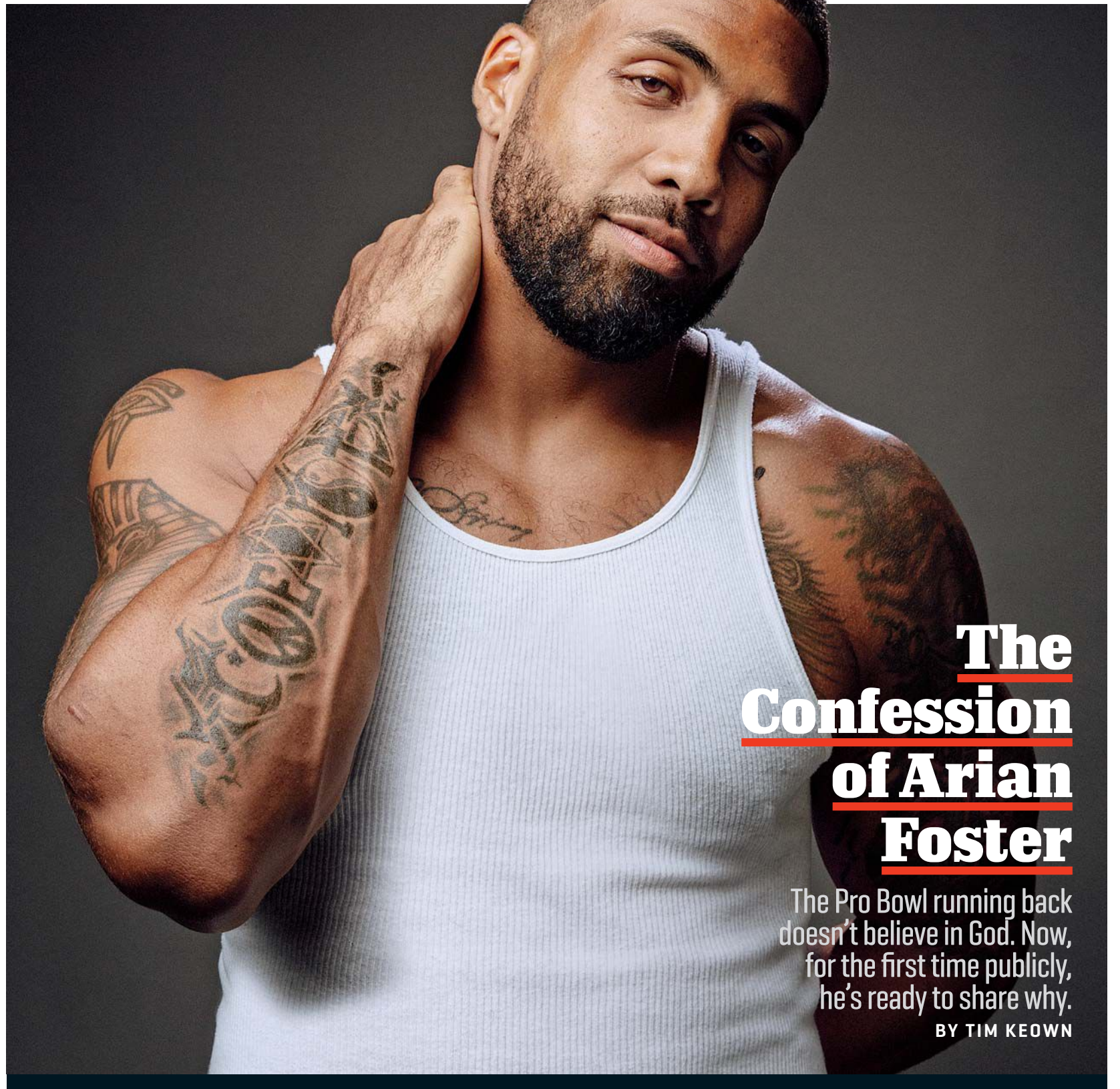
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The Confession of Arian Foster

The Pro Bowl running back doesn't believe in God. Now, for the first time publicly, he's ready to share why.

BY TIM KEOWN



Life's biggest questions are leading me through a narrow street in a stately Houston neighborhood, where haunting piles of home furnishings—cabinets, carpet, curtains—lie on the north side of the street in mud-streaked abandon. Meanwhile, the south side, unharmed by the torrential rain, looks as if it took up arms and ravaged the other. The difference is so stark, so precise, that some might be tempted to invoke divine intervention.

But if a just God intervened to spare the folks on the south side, why would he beget fires-of-hell vengeance upon those who happened to purchase a home on the other side of the street, where the floodwaters flowed over the curb, across the lawns and through living rooms and kitchens?

And is it blasphemy to even ask?

In a room toward the back of a home on the dry side of the street, Arian Foster ponders such questions. Given the reason I'm here, he laughs at the notion of celestial involvement in the water's path. Where some might see the hand of God, Foster sees physics and engineering, the slope of the road and the elevation of the homes in relation to a swollen runoff canal that bisects an arterial a few hundred yards away.

Science and faith. They've brought us to this



place, where Foster is ready to tell the story he's been leading toward for as long as he can remember.

THE HOUSE IS a churn of activity. Arian's mother, Bernadette, and sister, Christina, are cooking what they proudly call "authentic New Mexican food." His older brother, Abdul, is splayed out on a room-sized sectional, watching basketball and fielding requests from the five little kids—three of them Arian's—who are bouncing from the living room to the large playhouse, complete with slide, in the front room. I tell Abdul why I'm here and he says, "My brother—the anti-Tebow," with a comic eye roll.

Arian Foster, 28, has spent his entire public football career—in college at Tennessee, in the

**"I GET
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ARIAN FOSTER

NFL with the Texans—in the Bible Belt. Playing in the sport that most closely aligns itself with religion, in which God and country are both industry and packaging, in which the pregame flyover blends with the postgame prayer, Foster does not believe in God.

"Everybody always says the same thing: You have to have faith," he says. "That's my whole thing: Faith isn't enough for me. For people who are struggling with that, they're nervous about telling their families or afraid of the backlash ... man, don't be afraid to be you. I was, for years."

He has tossed out sly hints in the past, just enough to give himself wink-and-a-nod deniability, but he recently decided to become a public face of the nonreligious. Moved by the testimonials of celebrity atheists like comedian Bill Maher and magicians Penn and Teller, Foster has joined a national campaign by the nonprofit group Openly Secular, which plans to use his story to increase awareness and acceptance of nonbelievers, especially in sports. The organization initially approached ESPN about Foster's willingness to share his story, but ESPN subsequently dealt directly with Foster, and Openly Secular had no involvement.

It's difficult to imagine that any current or former teammate of Foster's will be surprised to learn that he does not believe in God. He openly discusses religion in the locker room, and opposing players often introduce themselves by saying, "I hear you're different." And yet he's spent six years in the NFL shielding his nonbelief from the public out of fear of being misinterpreted or—even worse—misabeled. "This is unprecedented," says Todd Stiefel, chair of Openly Secular. "He is the first active professional athlete, let alone star, to ever stand up in support of gaining respect for secular Americans."

The language of the unburdening, of the coming-out, is telling. The politicization of religion, and the religionization of politics, has created a feeling of marginalization among those who don't believe. Religion has become so entwined with the culture of sports that it has become its own language. Open Christianity is a subtext that draws players toward one another, even if they've never met, as if a single shared belief grants membership to the club.

Foster, who has run for more than 6,000 yards and been named to the Pro Bowl four times, understands the sensitivity of the topic and how telling his story might be perceived negatively within the conservative, image-obsessed league. "They're going to stay away from anything taboo,

FORWARD

which makes sense,” Foster says of the NFL. He also acknowledges the possibility of backlash in heavily evangelical Houston, home of Joel Osteen and the city that helped put the mega in megachurch. “You don’t want to ruin endorsements,” he says. “People might say, ‘I don’t want an atheist representing my team.’ Now, though, I’m established in this league, and as I’m digging deeper into myself and my truth, just being me is more important than being sexy to Pepsi or whoever. After a while, what’s an extra dollar compared to the freedom of being you? That’s the choice I made.”

Foster was raised Muslim in Albuquerque, New Mexico. “Prayed five times a day, facing east,” Foster says. His father, Carl—“a free thinker, very intelligent, knows the Bible front and back,” Arian says—pushed him to ask questions and challenge convention.

It’s a unique relationship. When high school coaches in Albuquerque wanted to move Arian from running back to defensive end for his junior year, Carl Foster wouldn’t hear of it. A former college wide receiver, already disenchanted by what he felt was the mishandling of Abdul’s football career, Carl arranged with his boss to reduce the travel for his job in the hospitality industry so he could move to San Diego with Arian for his final two years of high school. Carl and Bernadette were divorced, and Arian was using drugs and doing so poorly in school that he was unable to play basketball in his sophomore year. “I needed to get out of there,” Arian says. “Not a good scene.” Carl enrolled Arian in San Diego’s Mission Bay High School and rented what he calls “a one-room shack” four blocks from the beach for \$1,200 a month. Father and son awoke most mornings before 5 and headed for the beach, where Arian would train in the sand under his father’s tutelage. “I lived literally four feet from my son for two years,” Carl says. “He slept on one side of the room and I slept on the other.”

Arian felt he was living a lie every time he knelt to pray. His prayers carried intensity only when he faced turmoil. *If you can just get me out of this jam.* It was meaningless and dishonest; he didn’t believe there was anything or anyone out there capable of helping him. He read the Bible and the Quran in search of evidence that would override his skepticism. The concept of an omnipotent being nagged at him. *Why is this relationship so one-sided? Why would a loving God create evil? Why would he allow eternal damnation?* Foster felt like “a contestant in his game show.”

During his time in San Diego, elbow to elbow in

that room with his father, he inched closer to releasing his secret. Discussion followed discussion, and still Arian could not be convinced. There was backlash to consider then too: Carl Foster might have been an open-minded, well-read man, but religion was important to him. Finally, toward the end of his junior year, Arian summoned the courage to tell his father he did not believe—only to see his father nod knowingly and say, “Go find your truth.”

“It was a proud day,” Carl says. “We raised our kids to be free thinkers. We wanted them to be their own people.”

Arian thought college should be an adventure that demands adaptability and invites discomfort. He verbally committed to Oregon during a 2,000-yard senior season before changing his mind and choosing Tennessee, partly because he kept hearing local coaches say he’d never be an

SEC-level running back. (“My rebellious ass,” he says.) Foster says he believes he was the only member of the team who did not identify as either Christian or Catholic, which made him a source of speculation and misconception. His views, and his eagerness to share them, engendered an emotion that angled toward fear. He says his contrarian side sought out religious arguments with fundamentalist teammates, who would often attempt to dismiss the discussion by insisting, “Well, you must believe in something.” He pressed, telling them no, he believed in nothing, not Allah or God or the divinity of Christ. He wielded his defiance like a sword, reveling in the discomfort it generated. If he alienated teammates with his willingness to be different, all the better. His verbal ferocity was all rawness and sharp edges, and it allowed people to project upon him their worst fears.



Foster has learned to tune out NFL prayer circles. Still, he forged a strong friendship with the devout Forsett (28) based on mutual respect for their differing beliefs. "Arian pushes me to be a better man of faith," Forsett says.

"I get the devil-worship thing a lot. They'll ask me, 'You worship the devil?'" he says. "No, bro, I don't believe there's a God, why would I believe there's a devil?" There's a lot of ignorance about nonbelief. I don't mean a negative connotation of ignorance. I just mean a lack of understanding, a lack of knowledge, lack of exposure to people like me."

That might be the case in locker rooms in Knoxville and Houston, but a recent study from the Pew Research Center indicates a gradual shift in religious identification. The number of Americans who say they are not affiliated with any organized religion (including those who identify as agnostic or atheist) has jumped more than 6 percentage points (16.1 to 22.8) in the past seven years. Still, just 3.1 percent of Americans identify as atheist specifically, and according to a 2012 Gallup poll, only 54 percent of Americans would vote for an atheist for president, a lower mark than for a Muslim (58 percent), a gay or lesbian candidate (68 percent) or a Mormon (80 percent).

"If a loving, kind Christian, Muslim or Jewish person can't accept a different vantage point, there's just nothing I can do about it," Foster says. "I have no ill will toward religion or religious people. I have no quarrels. Believe what you want to believe."

With that, he displays his talent as a master of the eloquent shrug and leans back in an office chair in a back bedroom that he's turned into a recording and writing studio. The house, a rental, is modest for a man working on a five-year, \$43.5 million contract. There's a Range Rover in the driveway but no fleet. "I don't want or need much," he says. "Just something fairly safe for the kids to grow up around, and that's about it, really. The rest is luxury, fluff. I've saved about 80 percent of what I've made, and I will continue that. I won't have to work when I'm done—live off the interest, put my kids through college, let them have the money when I'm in a box and call it a day, man."

He plays the keyboard in this room, writes music and poetry. Saved inside the Mac on the desk are a few latent screenplays. "I have to write for my sanity," he says.

His 6-year-old daughter, Zeniah, knocks and enters. Dinner is finished, and she wants to know if it's OK for her to eat the ice cream her grandmother has promised. As she skips away, free to indulge, Foster mentions—his voice betraying an *I know, I know* tone—that Zeniah just finished kindergarten at a Catholic elementary school.

"Every once in a while she'll mention Jesus or God," he says. "One time she likened God and Jesus to Zeus and Hercules. She did it on her own. She said something along the lines of, 'They're the same. They're both stories.' I thought it was brilliant on her part to be able to distinguish it."

Religion may be football's sole concession to humility, perhaps the only gesture that suggests the game itself is not its own denomination. Nowhere is the looming proximity of Christianity more pronounced than in the SEC, where, in the time of Tim Tebow, a man named Chad Gibbs was inspired to write a book—*God and Football*—telling of his travels to every SEC school to decipher how like-minded Christians navigate the cliff walk between rooting for Florida and maintaining their devotion to Christ. These religious currents aren't confined to football, of course: Big league baseball teams routinely hold "faith and family" days; players appear at postgame celebrations to give their testimonials, and Christian rock bands perform well into the night. In football, though, public displays of faith can be viewed as a necessary accessory for such a dangerous and violent sport.

Former NFL punter Chris Kluwe, who describes himself as "cheerfully agnostic," says, "It's an implied social construct that of course you're going to say the Lord's Prayer before the game with your team—why wouldn't you? And of course there's going to be a military flyover—why wouldn't there be? These aren't requirements, but they're assumed requirements. Religion plays a big role in the NFL, but I think it's a structural role. It's like white-male privilege; it's hard to see the role it plays if your entire life has been lived within that structure. If you're a religious guy in the NFL, you don't see the problem. You're the one in it. You have chapel or Mass on Sunday before the game. You have Bible study during the week. It's built into the structure."

So what does football look and sound like to the nonbeliever? Foster sits at his locker before every game, facing the wall, the music in his headphones internalizing his preparation. At some point before the Texans come together to take the field, he can feel the men behind him congregating to form a circle. There is no tap on the shoulder or

invitation to join. Through the headphones he can hear the low murmur of a teammate asking Jesus to keep them safe from harm, and afterward the collective hum of the group reciting the Lord's Prayer. Before the game, he nods along to the ubiquitous God-bless-yous that register as white noise to everyone but him, and afterward he hears the postgame shoutouts to God, a standard reflex in most interviews with the triumphant.

But if God is helping *you* win, Foster wonders, isn't he by definition ensuring that the other guy loses? As is the case with Foster's street, the water must choose a side. "If there is a God and he's watching football, there are so many other things he could be doing," he says. "There are hungry children and diseases and famine and so much important stuff going on in the world, and he's really blessed your team? It's just weird to me."

The separation of church and football—not to mention church and public education—blurred at Tennessee, Foster says. Coaches, led by head coach Phil Fulmer, scheduled trips to Sunday church services as team-building exercises. Foster asked to be excused. He was denied. (The school confirmed that these team-building exercises to churches took place.) Word spread: Foster was arrogant, selfish, difficult to coach. "They just thought I was being a rebel and didn't want to participate in the team activities," Foster says. "I was like, 'No, that's not it. Church doesn't do anything for me. I'm not a Christian.' I said, 'We can do other team-bonding activities and I'll gladly go, but this doesn't do anything for me.'"

"So I went, probably five times. I don't want to bring race into it, but we never went to any predominantly black churches. We went to a lot of those upper-middle-class white churches, which I always found interesting because the majority of the team was black, so I thought the majority of the team would relate to a black church. I would rather go to a black church, honestly, because the music is better to me. If the majority of your team is black, why wouldn't they try to make them as comfortable as possible? But I guess when you're dealing with religion, color shouldn't matter."

JUSTIN FORSETT NOTICED the tattoo first. COEXIST, written in religious symbols, running across Foster's right forearm.

The son of a preacher, Forsett had one thought: *OK, this guy's different.*

It was training camp 2012, Forsett's only season with the Texans, and the combination of Foster's reputation for aloofness and his body art made Forsett decide to keep his distance. "I knew where

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FORWARD

he was coming from,” Forsett says. And then one day Foster asked him a question—Forsett chooses not to elaborate on the details, only to say it was nothing outrageous—and Forsett said, “I try to stay away from that because of my faith.”

Foster’s interest was piqued. They began to discuss religion, and morals, and whether one can exist without the other. Every day, it seemed, Foster presented Forsett with a different question, a new challenge. In Forsett, Foster found a friendly adversary, someone who wouldn’t cower, who could back his beliefs with both Bible verses and actions. They discussed their reverse-image lives, how one of them had grown up in the West and gone to college as a nonbeliever in the Bible Belt, while the other was a devout Christian who grew up in Texas and went to college in Berkeley. Each had felt marginalized. Each was extremely accustomed to defending his beliefs to hostile questioners.

“Arian is going to voice his thoughts whether you want them or not, or whether you ask for them or not,” says Forsett, now with the Ravens. “He’ll make a statement. You can choose to respond or you can let him speak. He’s very smart, very witty. If you’re not confident in what you believe, and if you don’t know what you believe, you’ll get caught up and probably look silly. Most guys want to let Arian be Arian. They might get embarrassed, and that’s why they don’t engage.”

There is an edge to Foster and a predator’s sense of weakness. Letting Arian be Arian is a euphemistic way of saying he can be cutting and abrasive, eager to display his intelligence like plumage. Perhaps because of Forsett’s refusal to back down, a friendship sprouted. The two running backs communicate almost daily, and when Forsett ends a conversation or text exchange with “I’ll pray for you”—as he often does—Foster responds with “And I’ll *think* for you.” When Forsett tweets out, “The [Bible] verse for tonight is ...,” as he does every night, Foster has been known to tease him by replying, “When are you gonna give us your least favorite verse, though?”

“Arian pushes me to be a better man and a better man of faith,” Forsett says. “He’s going to ask questions, tough questions, and I take that as a challenge. I have to be prepared to give a response at any given moment. If I don’t have a response, he’s going to push me to go get it.”

Says Foster: “Here’s what I respect about

him: Justin was never like, ‘Hey, man, you’re going to go to hell.’ He was like, ‘This is what I believe is the right way, and I’ll pray for you.’ I never feel arrogance or judgment. He never acted like he had something I don’t have. He said, ‘I would love for you to experience this,’ which is more divine than anything I’ve ever come across.”

Forsett laughs at the irony. A man with no faith poking and prodding the faithful to come to a better understanding of their beliefs, and a devout man displaying tolerance that helps his friend become less contrary, less argumentative, less intent on embarrassing those who have difficulty defending themselves. Truth be told, Foster would demand answers from teammates and classmates at Tennessee whenever they reflexively employed their version of Christianity to defend their social or political positions. He’d listen impatiently and fire Bible verses back at them like throwing knives, anything to show he knew more about their religion than they did.

“I used to try to argue people down and show them the fallacies in their own religion,” Foster says. “That used to be a big deal to me, but now that doesn’t serve my ethos at all.”

I’VE MADE TWO trips to Foster’s water-sodden neighborhood to talk about his decision to come forward and speak on behalf of those who don’t believe in God. We talk about the risk inherent in that decision and the journey that made him willing to take it. We talk about nonliteral interpretations of the Bible and his belief that “if you look at the teachings of Jesus and understand the man and character that he is, that’s a good dude. I’ve got no problem with Jesus.” I ask him if it would be harder to be a nonbeliever or a Muslim in the NFL. “Probably one and the same,” he says. “Islam is so associated with terrorism in our country.”

He tells the story of his mother, who was raised Catholic, briefly converted to Islam and is now agnostic. “She has internal struggles,” Foster says. “Right now she feels like, ‘What if I’m wrong?’” Foster assures her by saying, “We’ve been to the moon, and there’s no heaven up there. We’ve dug in the dirt, there’s no devil down there. It’s OK to think what you think.” They discuss adopting the principles of the gospels without accepting Christ’s divinity.

Talk to Foster for any length of time and one truth becomes evident: His eagerness to

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"I'M NOT A PICKET-SIGN ATHEIST. BELIEVE WHAT YOU WANT TO BELIEVE."

ARIAN FOSTER

become a public spokesman for nonbelievers might be the least surprising part about him. Over the past two years, he's gone through "some things," as he puts it, and the re-examination of his life led him to this point, where no one is left to merely suspect where he stands on religion or virtually anything else. Always outspoken—Foster has admitted to taking impermissible benefits at Tennessee—his public unburdening seems to have unleashed a newfound freedom.

The only topic off-limits, it seems, is one he is legally prohibited from discussing. Foster was the subject of a nasty and public paternity lawsuit in 2014; a 20-year-old college student named Brittany Norwood reportedly reached a sealed out-of-court settlement after claiming Foster, married at the time, was the father of her then-unborn son. Norwood took her charges to the Houston media, including allegations that Arian and Abdul pushed her to have an abortion. (In July, Foster's wife filed for divorce, declining to make the reasons public other than to say, "After much thought and soul-searching, I have made the difficult decision to end our marriage.") The suit came just four months after Foster wrote a widely praised—and public—letter for Zeniah that included the line, "Let her know that she must hold every man accountable for who they are and how they act towards her." The man so willing to hold his teammates accountable for their contradictions found himself defending his own.

FOSTER WAS IN the Texans' training room after an offseason workout when two of his teammates began a conversation about immigration.

"We should close off the border with Mexico," one of them said.

The other agreed.

Foster, whose mother is Mexican-American, interrupted.

"Aren't you guys Christian?" he asked.

They both said they were.

"Didn't Jesus say love thy neighbor? And is Mexico not our neighbor?"

They began to argue, telling him he was missing the point, that this wasn't about religion.

"I'm not saying that to throw it in your face," Foster said. "I'm not religious, but I agree with a lot of the core tenets Jesus held."

Let Arian be Arian.

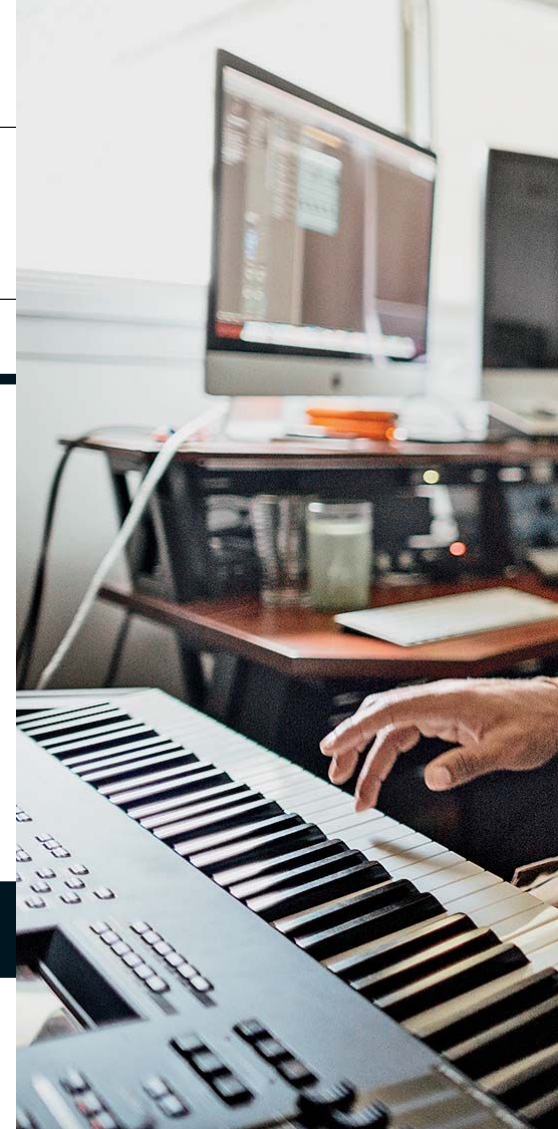
Sometimes it's just easier that way.

Back at his house, telling the story, he shrugs again. Foster stops short of calling himself an atheist, not because he isn't—his language is the language of the atheist—but because someday he might not be. "I have an open mind," he says. "I'm not a picket-sign atheist. I just want to be a happy human being and continue to learn." He also has a visceral dislike of labels. (On June 28 he tweeted, "hop in the uber and the driver immediately turns it to the rap station. he's absolutely correct, but don't judge me, yo.") "If I tell you I'm a Republican, your mind immediately starts telling you all the things I must believe," he says. "Same with the

word 'atheist,' and I don't like people making assumptions about me. Neil deGrasse Tyson said any time you attach yourself to a group or an '-ist,' you get all the stereotypical baggage with it. I'm not going to picket the White House lawn to get atheists a voice in Congress. But I have questions and concerns on our origins as human beings, and the best way to go about that is through science.

"There's no dogma in science itself. Scientists? Yeah, any human can have an ego, but if you take the human beings out of it, there's no ego in science itself. It's built on 'prove me wrong.' But religion can be like, 'We're right, and if you're not in the boat, you're going to hell.'"

There are fundamentalist Christians, fundamentalist Muslims and fundamentalist atheists. Richard Dawkins, a British scientist and the author of *The God Delusion*, is an atheist provocateur, espousing the belief that religion impedes the progress of civilized society. Foster has read him extensively, but—as part of his new ethos—he rejects what he calls Dawkins' militant approach. Foster understands the value of religion as refuge, as a means of accepting what the mind can't comprehend. He describes the New Testament as "an awesome story." His message in the Openly Secular interviews is one of acceptance





and understanding, not condescension and disparagement. “I feel you can’t be judgmental and aggressive,” Foster tells me. “The more empathy you have toward people and their belief system, the more productive the relationship will be. I get it. I understand why people believe.”

Everyone in this business reaches a point where all the branding efforts and PR staffs and media-relations managers turn the simple act of having a conversation with an athlete into a different version of the same endless Kabuki. What’s the story about? How long do you need? Can you mention his charity? PR people sit in on interviews, time them, cut them off. The process is as spontaneous as a stump speech. In a weird reversal, Foster’s business manager called after I’d spent hours with his client. Humble Lukanga says he wants to prepare for the aftershocks, not prevent the quake. But what repercussions does he fear? Pickets at the stadium? A band of Joel Osteen disciples gathering at Foster’s home to explain how the dry side of the street was God’s subtle way of leading Arian toward the prosperity gospel? Lukanga can’t say. “Arian has always been a rebel at heart,” he says. “He’s never been worried about backlash.” The inference is clear: *Somebody* has to be. To Foster, though, the act of getting his

story out there—and the freedom it creates—is a form of immunity.

Foster is *in* football but not *of* it, an outsider on the inside. He routinely finds himself standing on the sideline or in the huddle, looking up at the stands of a sold-out stadium and thinking, “Man, all these people are really here to watch us play a game.”

“It’s so weird, so weird,” he says. “I take my job seriously, I really do, and I work my ass off for it. But sometimes I’ll be in meetings and the coach will be up there all stressing out. ‘Rarr-rarr-rarr.’ Veins popping out. I’ll be thinking, ‘This is just a game.’ In the grand scheme of things, it really doesn’t matter that much. It really doesn’t, man, but you can’t admit that—or else.”

IS THIS CASUAL rebellion? Does he provoke for a greater good or simply his own amusement? Is he somehow the conscience of a generation of athletes, the only one willing to say the things the ominous Sword of Pepsi has made virtually extinct? Or is he speaking to an entirely different audience, a counterculture that appreciates a man who stands on the sideline and sees the NFL’s embrace of the military-industrial complex as “the commercialization of everything—just

symbolism, man, and it gets people pumped up and feeling good and takes everything to an extreme”?

Sometimes it’s hard to tell.

“It’s sexy to be a professional athlete, right?” he asks. “So the guy who’s bagging your groceries is on Twitter talking s--- about you. ‘You suck.’ ‘You’re trash.’ He doesn’t think to himself, ‘He’s not just a football player, like I’m not just a grocery bagger.’

“If you ask him, he’d say, ‘No, man, I’m not just a grocery bagger. I’m way more than that. I have all these thoughts and beliefs. I have aspirations.’ It’s the same way I feel. I’m not just a football player. There’s a lot more to me.”

“And if you were to lash out and call that person just a grocery bagger ...” I say.

“Then I’d be arrogant, an a--hole, a prick,” he says.

Foster smiles and says, “Yo, check this out.” He holds his right arm up to show the word *SELF*, then holds up the left to show *MADE*. “Self-made,” he says, drawing it out. “Look, I believe my hard work did get me here, but as a 28-year-old adult, I understand you had to have a lot of help, and you had to have a lot of luck. A lot of things factor into it, but I got that when I was an arrogant little kid.”

He’s got another one: *AGAINST ALL ODDS*. It’s like a greatest-hits album of an 18-year-old’s tattoo choices. He laughs at this one too. “When I was growing up, I felt like I was always against all odds,” he says. “Then as an adult, I realized there were a lot of obstacles, Arian, but you caused a lot of them.”

His next tattoo will depict a mummified American flag. “She’s just hurting,” he says. “America’s hurting.”

The words hang. The rain has stopped. I head out, past the cabinets and carpet and curtains. Two hours later, a racist with a gun will be welcomed into a Bible study at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and an hour later, a gun will be pulled. Dylann Roof now stands charged with killing nine of the worshippers. The question will be asked: “How could God allow such a thing?” And God’s mysterious ways will once again be invoked. The congregants of the church will draw strength from their faith and express their truth through words of forgiveness for the shooter. At the time the murders occur, Foster will be in an auditorium in Houston, listening to Neil deGrasse Tyson give a lecture on the cosmos, an entirely different set of mysteries, equally unknowable. ■

The Secret of Spieth's Success

Two majors and a fistful of records in hand, Jordan Spieth will step to the first tee at the PGA Championship (Aug. 13-16) trying to become the third player ever to win three majors in the same year. Can he do it? We asked the 22-year-old to explain his sudden supremacy—then put his self-analysis to the metric test.

INTERVIEW BY SCOTT VAN PELT

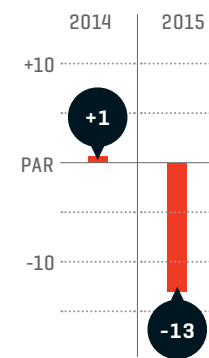


We know this much: Spieth looks terrific in green.

You seem to have your very best when your very best is required. What exactly do you attribute that to?

It seems like whenever the moment gets bigger and my heart is beating faster, I go away from mechanics and I turn to, “How do I calm my heart rate down?” And the way that I do that is by trying to zero in on a target—to aim small, miss small. For me, that actually helps my swing. It helps my putting stroke. It helps everything in my game. It’s easier for me to think less about mechanics and more about the mental side, controlling my emotions and really picking a specific target instead of worrying about how my swing looks.

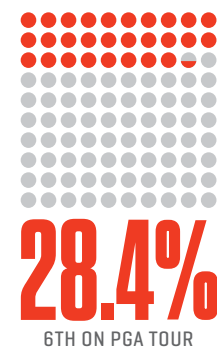
SPIETH’S CUMULATIVE ROUND 4 SCORE TO PAR WHEN ENTERING WITH A LEAD OR WITHIN ONE STROKE OF THE LEAD.



You talk very much in “we” terms—with your caddie, Michael Greller, being the other part of your team. Does he help you to find calm on the course and to tune out the noise?

Yeah, I think so. After the 17th hole at the U.S. Open is a good example. I had just made double bogey to essentially go from winning the tournament to having a chance to lose. I did a good job of calming myself down, but Michael was behind me saying, “It’s OK. It’s OK. We still have a lead. You’re gonna hit two solid shots up there and have a putt for eagle.” And, you know, that kind of voice really helps me stay focused on the goal at hand, which is the next shot.

HOW OFTEN SPIETH RESPONDS TO A BOGEY OR WORSE WITH A BIRDIE OR BETTER.



What did you learn about yourself through the process of winning at Chambers Bay?

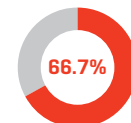
The Masters was more comfortable, but the U.S. Open was a bit more like a bar fight.

I learned that the winning formula I thought I had at Augusta is actually a winning formula for all majors. It’s the preparation that goes into it and then the mental strategy on the weekend. I try to avoid big numbers and seem to do that well. I think it’s based on just understanding the golf course, mapping it out ahead of time and knowing where you can miss. That extra patience level that I didn’t have until this year can help close the deal.

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Kids These Days

From Kris Bryant to Bryce Harper to Mike Trout, the majors haven't been this dominated by young talent in decades. And we've got the numbers to prove it.

BY ROB ARTHUR
A FIVETHIRTYEIGHT COLLABORATION

When Derek Jeter retired last year, pundits puzzled over who would become the next face of baseball. Would there be enough prodigious young players to replace the retirees?

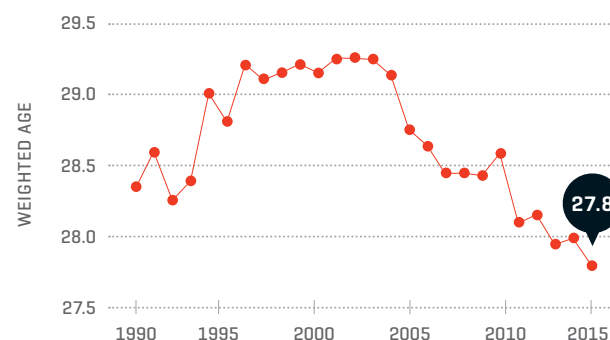
The answer has been a resounding yes. The kids are damn good, and they're part of one of the most significant youth movements in the past 25 years.

This is revealed by a statistic called weighted age, which takes the average age of all position players and weighs it based on wins above replacement—if younger

players are producing a ton of value, for example, that will lower MLB's weighted age. And since the early 2000s, that's exactly what's happened: Weighted age has consistently fallen, hitting its lowest point this year at 27.8 years old. Those twin faces of the youngster movement, Mike Trout, 23, and Bryce Harper, 22, are dominating, of course. But they aren't alone. The majors have welcomed a generation of superprospects who are outperforming already lofty expectations—Kris Bryant, Joc Pederson, Carlos Correa, Mookie Betts.

FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

We plotted weighted age—the average age of all position players weighted by WAR—for each season since 1990. The conclusion: The best players are younger than they've been in decades.



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In fact, players 24 and younger have produced 67.5 WAR this season, putting them on pace for about 130 all told. (For comparison, the 33-and-older class has produced 32.6 WAR, on track to be the fourth lowest in the past 25 years.) If the youngsters' pace holds, that would be the most WAR from this age group in that same time frame, surpassing 2007's figures.

That year, David Wright, then 24, had his best season, and he was joined by Troy Tulowitzki, Jose Reyes and Miguel Cabrera, among others. Twelve young hitters put up WAR values greater than 4 (considered All-Star-level performance), and many went on to become stars.

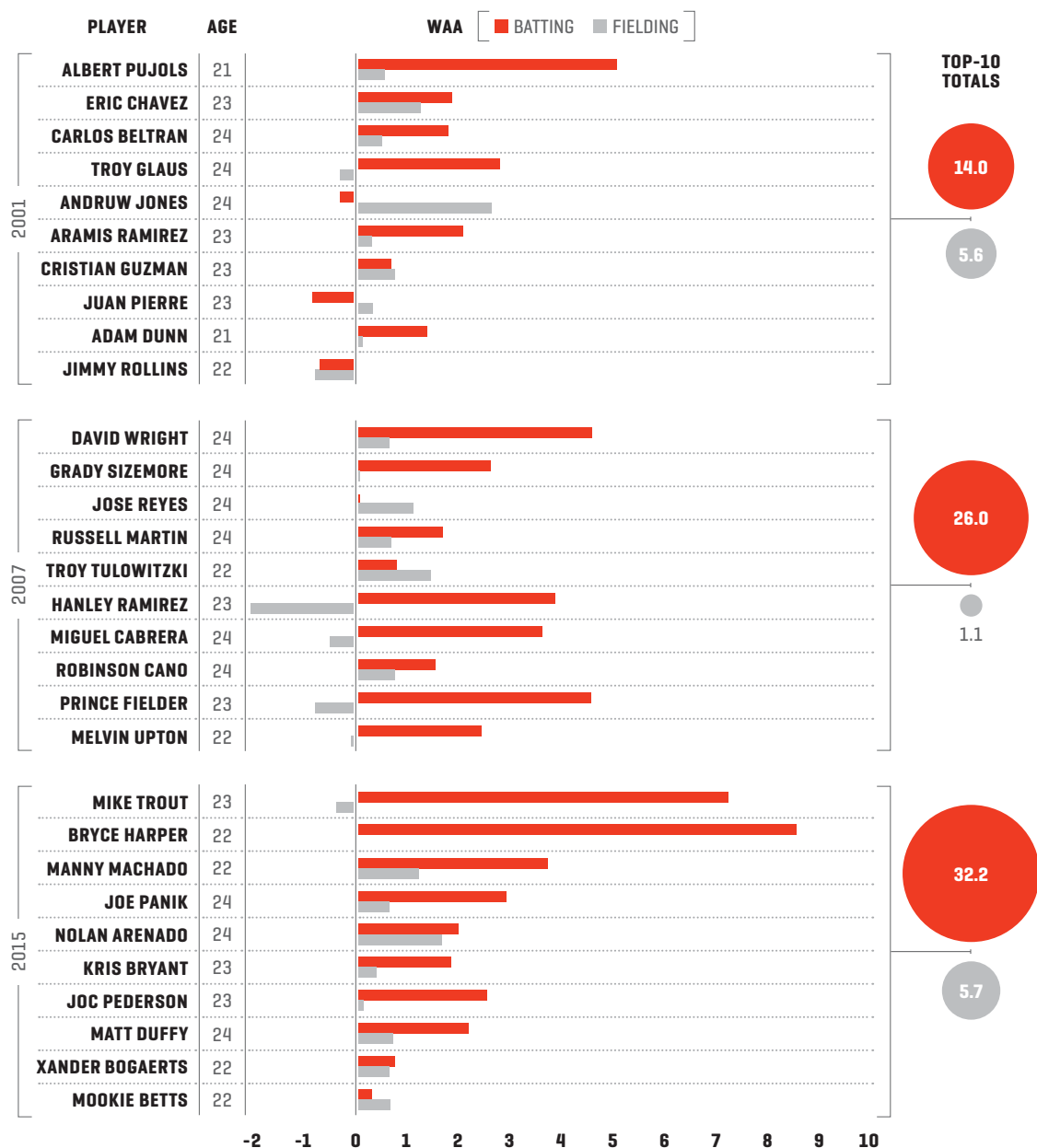
Young players have traditionally relied on defense to prove their worth, and the gloves this year have been exceptional. Typically the 24-and-unders collectively perform anywhere from 100 to 500 runs below average on offense but partially make up for it with about 100 to 200 runs in defense. This season they've already been worth 107.3 runs defensively, a pace that would be the best defensive performance in this age group since 2001.

Except today's kids can do something the class of 2001 couldn't: rake. One stat that shows this is weighted runs created plus (wRC+), which measures a player's offensive value relative to the average player, whose value is set at 100. This year's under-24 crew has a collective wRC+ of 96.5, the highest number since that '07 class (99.2). Much of that stems from a power surge: They're racking up a slugging percentage of .402, slightly better than the MLB average of .397.

As with all stats, some overall averages won't hold up over the full season due to injuries or regression to the mean, and September call-ups will distort many of the numbers. But one thing surely won't change: We're witnessing the rise of future superstars. **E**

BABY BOMBERS

At the plate, this season's 24-and-under crowd is blowing away classes of young players from earlier years. More than half of the total wins above average (a player's contribution relative to the average MLB player) in this year's group is coming from its 10 best players, all of whom are starting.



Age as of July 1 of each season. All stats through July 26 and from FanGraphs.



COLD HARD FACTS

What's Zack Greinke's future? The ZiPS projection system knows. —DAN SZYMBORSKI

6.6

ZiPS projects the Dodgers' ace to end 2015 with 6.6 WAR, his highest finish since 2009, when he won the AL Cy Young.

2

ZiPS projects that Greinke, 31, will sign a six-year, \$154M deal, the second richest for a free agent pitcher (David Price).

235

Before this year, ZiPS projected Greinke with 210 career wins. Now the total is up to 235, fifth among active pitchers.

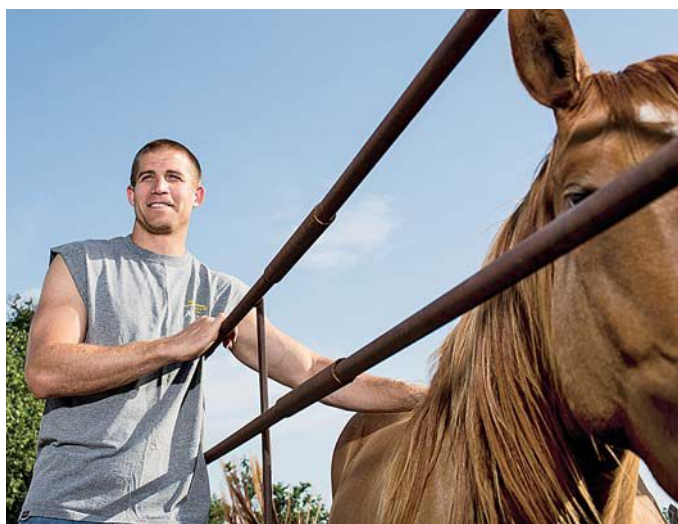
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GREEN BAY
PACKERS WIDE
RECEIVER

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DRIVING A
COMBINE
DURING WHEAT
HARVEST

WHEN
JUNE 24

WHERE
LEONARDVILLE,
KANSAS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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For many NFL pros, the offseason means private islands and poolside cabanas. Not for Jordy Nelson. The 30-year-old, who set the Packers' single-season receiving record last year with 1,519 yards, swaps his cleats for work boots on his family's 4,000-acre Kansas farm. For five or six weeks each year, he drives a combine and cuts wheat, sometimes for 12 hours a day, or rounds up some of the 1,000-cow herd. "Working cattle is my favorite farm duty," he says. "It's interactive, and you're on your feet all day." As early as age 12, Nelson was driving tractor loads of wheat into town, hitting the road before he had a driver's license. "I probably identify more as a farmer [than a football player]," he says. "Around here, I'm just the farm kid that they have always known." Now that summer is winding down, though, it's back to that other place that knows him well (and to his paying job): Lambeau Field. —ANNA KATHERINE CLEMMONS





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In Extra Time

Legendary midfielder Steven Gerrard hung up his Liverpool boots after 17 years with the Reds. Now, in all white for the LA Galaxy, he's out to prove himself all over again.

BY CHRIS JONES
AN ESPN FC COLLABORATION



ILLUSTRATION BY STUDIO 168

PHOTO REFERENCE FROM LEFT: KELVIN KUO/USA TODAY SPORTS; STEVE PROEHL/PROEHL STUDIOS/CORBIS; 2/MITCH DIAMOND/OCEAN/CORBIS; HELEN KING/CORBIS; SHAUN CLARK/GETTY IMAGES

08.17.2015 ESPN 33



Steven Gerrard takes his seat in the front row of a private box at StubHub Center in Carson, California, and settles in to watch his first game as a stateside member of the LA Galaxy. It's July 4, and the stadium is sold out, 27,000 strong and festive. The LA Riot Squad, one of the team's more notable supporter groups, has been well refreshed by a truckload of beer Gerrard bought for its tailgate—veteran move, that—accompanied by a hand-signed letter: “I look forward to meeting you at tonight’s match.” Gerrard is more than getting his wish. This isn’t Anfield, and he is essentially sitting in the crowd, separated only by a low block wall.

Gerrard, always a commanding presence in the Prem, isn't about to mellow in MLS. “I’ll be what I’ve been since I was 17 or 18,” he says. “I’m not going to change.”

STEVEN GERRARD, CAPTAIN FANTASTIC

Gerrard played for Liverpool for 17 years, so it's no surprise that he ranks among the club's leaders in PKs, games and goals—but he also had a knack for scoring when it counted the most.

A steady stream of fans stops by for autographs and pictures; a few of them are already wearing Gerrard's No. 8 in Galaxy white. "That's a bit of a gamble," he says. "They haven't seen me play yet." He points to one fan in particular: "He'll be back wearing his Robbie Keane jersey next week."

Gerrard is a soccer legend, a standard-bearer for Liverpool and for England. In a season of marquee signings for Major League Soccer—Juventus' Andrea Pirlo and Manchester City's Frank Lampard to New York City FC, Chelsea's Didier Drogba to the Montreal Impact—he's arguably the biggest, in part because he has worn only one club jersey his entire career. He's been lifted out of a safe no one believed could be cracked. But he's still taking tentative first steps in LA, a city he had never visited before signing his 18-month contract with the Galaxy. "I feel like a kid on the first day of school," the 35-year-old says. The jet lag has slowed him, and the traffic has left him off-balance, and he's watching the game he loves played by strangers. (Keane, a former teammate at Liverpool, is a notable exception.) He can't take the field before the MLS transfer window opens on July 8, so here he sits, a spectator, while the rest of the Galaxy take on Toronto FC. "I'm not a good watcher," he says.

Gerrard, as it turns out, is an excellent watcher. He sees soccer differently, sees it from the inside even from the outside. From the opening whistle, he points urgently to open men, curls his fingers to shape the ball, exhorts and admires and admonishes each side, nearly equally. "He's a good player, No. 10," he says, referring to Toronto's Sebastian Giovinco, the dangerous Italian forward who transferred from Juventus this season. The Galaxy earn an early penalty, and when Keane steps up to the spot, Gerrard can't help guessing along with the keeper. "I think he's going to reverse it, toward me," he says. Keane fools even his old friend, going right and just under the bar for a 1-0 lead.

When Liverpool manager Brendan Rodgers told Gerrard he'd see fewer and fewer starts, and after the club danced around signing him last year, he began looking for a new home for the first time in his life. He received offers from Premiership sides and clubs across Europe, but he couldn't stomach the idea of playing against Liverpool. His agent, Struan Marshall, was talking to Galaxy president Chris Klein when Klein—"It was almost kind of a joke," he says today—asked about Gerrard's plans. To Klein's surprise, Marshall replied: "You know, I think we could have something."

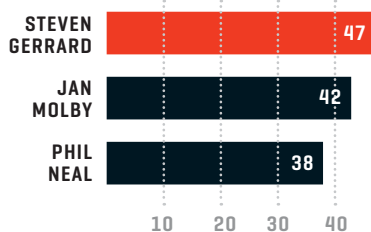
The team quickly put together a reported \$9 million offer for a season and a half of work.



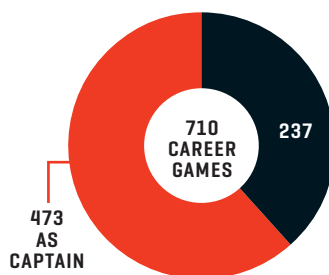
Of Gerrard's 120 goals in the Premier League, almost a third (37) won Liverpool the match.



Gerrard scored 36 league goals from outside the box, fourth best in EPL history.



Gerrard holds the Liverpool record for converted penalty kicks, making good on 47 of 57 attempts.



No Liverpool player has worn the armband as often as Gerrard, who spent two-thirds of his career as captain.

Gerrard did his version of due diligence, calling a number of friends who had made the move to MLS, including Keane, Thierry Henry and David Beckham, another celebrated LA import. (Gerrard says the first question he received upon his arrival in Los Angeles was more of a statement: "You're not as good-looking as Beckham, are you?") Beckham—more famous but perhaps further past his prime when he made his move to California at age 32 in 2007—was emphatic: "Go for it, you'll love it," he told his former England teammate. "That was it," Gerrard says.

Now, from his perch in the suite, he burrows deeper into the layers of the American game. He's taking careful note of the time that players have with the ball, the distance from the front to the back, the movement of the midfielders. "We're quite high and aggressive," he says, monitoring the Galaxy's forward lines. "The important thing now is not to concede. Just frustrate them." Galaxy midfielder Sebastian Lletget makes a run, and Gerrard shifts to the edge of his seat: "Can you? In the box! In the box!"

He is asked whether he'll be as commanding on the field as he is from the stands, or whether he'll take time to introduce himself to his new team before he starts issuing orders. "I'll be what I've been since I was 17 or 18 years old," he says. "I'm not going to change. It'd be naive of me to watch this and think, 'This looks easy.' But I'll be fine."

The Galaxy's A.J. DeLaGarza blocks a shot and Gerrard claps his hands like a fan. "Superb defending," he says. LA counters and Gerrard starts shouting, "Change it! Change it!" He is struck by the play of his fellow midfielder Juninho, the tiny, quick Brazilian. "Oh, he's a lovely little footballer," Gerrard says. "Do you see the way he's looking over his shoulders? He's already done the work before the ball comes." Toronto's Giovinco manages to loft a high shot off a broken play and Gerrard again takes note. "He's very clever. Have to watch him. Not many players have that sort of vision."

Giovinco isn't the only one to have earned an admirer tonight. A stumbling fan in an Iron Maiden T-shirt, blinded by both drink and possibility, makes his way to the wall in front of Gerrard. "I love you, Stevie," he slurs. Gerrard's wife, Alex Curran, is sitting behind him, and he turns to look at her, a little wide-eyed. He's fast realizing that while he won't be nearly as conspicuous in LA as he is in Liverpool, he'll be more accessible. Los Angeles won't abide reverence's limits.

Just before halftime, Gerrard and Klein walk down from their seats toward the far end of the

field. The whistle blows, and a montage plays on the stadium's big screen. It's Gerrard in Liverpool colors, always in Liverpool colors, scoring goal after miracle goal. He smiles, watching the clips—"You beauty!" the announcer cries—and god, Steven Gerrard really was a beautiful player. Steven Gerrard, every inch of 6 feet tall, full gallop, head up, chest out; Steven Gerrard, who started playing for Liverpool when he was 8; Steven Gerrard, whose 10-year-old cousin was one of the youngest victims of the Hillsborough disaster; *Steve Gerrard, Gerrard, he'll pass the ball 40 yards, he's big and he's f---ing hard.* That same Steven Gerrard is somehow here, in Los Angeles, on July 4, and the crowd rises and roars to greet him, welcome to America.

He stands in the middle of the pitch, bathed in warmth and light, and takes the microphone. "Thank you very much for a fantastic welcome, and thanks very much for making myself and my family feel at home here in LA," he says.

Later that night, after the Galaxy have won 4-0—three of the goals from Keane, a guiding star in this league of more minor constellations—and after Gerrard begins his commute with his wife back to their house in Beverly Hills, the already endless lights of Los Angeles are seemingly made even more infinite by the fireworks. There are fireworks rocketing into the air next to the freeway and out of backyards over the brown hills. There are dozens of explosions in the sky, and it's a spectacular, throat-closing sight, a million white sparkles against the blackness, and Steven Gerrard must feel as though he's not only changed teams but worlds, having traded so much old for this shining sliver of new.

ON TUESDAY MORNING, July 7, Gerrard joins his teammates for the duck walk through the parking lots to University Field No. 2, outside the stadium, for his first official training session, or at least his first semipublic one. There are more than 100 reporters present for his unveiling. Some of them are English, filing updates on a departed hero; more of them are American, reporting on the arrival of the latest curiosity. "Which one is he?" one cameraman asks.

"The one with the smallest forehead," an English voice answers.

Gerrard and Keane stretch a little and then begin passing the ball, the early reunion of a partnership already weighted with expectation. Then Galaxy coach Bruce Arena instructs his players through a possession game. You can tell when Gerrard's holding the ball even with your

eyes closed because of the chorus of camera shutters that go off each time he finds it.

Other drills are whistled to stops and starts, and Gerrard looks good, if not great. His touches, his tiny redirections and heels, demonstrate his gifts and the wisdom that's replaced some of them, but his shots are weak and off target. It's like watching a plane that's lost an engine: still capable of flight, just not nearly as majestic.

Then Arena divides the players for a short-field scrimmage. They'll play four four-minute games. Arena puts Gerrard and Keane on the same side, which doesn't seem like an accident. They're wearing gray; the other side is yellow. "We'll play aggregate," the coach says.

Suddenly, it looks less like a practice and more like a match. Keane puts the ball off the post and spits, "Ah, f--- off!" The gray team nets one soon after for a 1-0 lead.

In the second game, Gerrard steals the ball off the opposing keeper's nervous feet and stuffs it into the goal. Next he pushes forward a lovely little lead that results in another goal. Yellow strikes once, but gray answers quickly.

In the third game, Keane races down the field with Gerrard, and they execute a perfect give-and-go—"Stevie!" Keane calls, scoring the lone goal of the match.

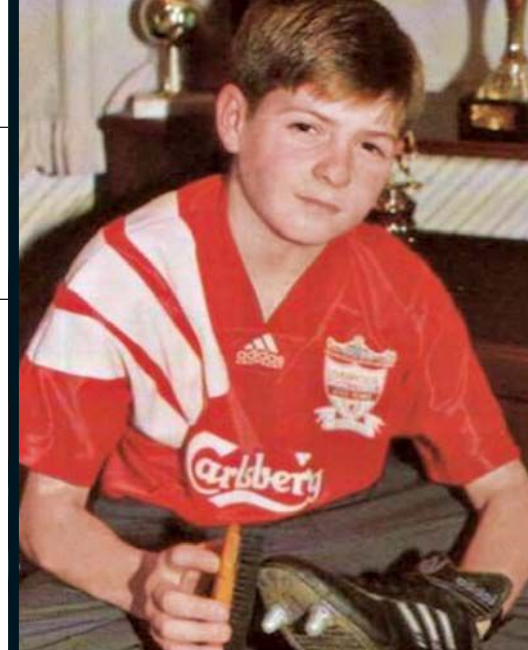
And in the final game, Gerrard sets up another strike with the most delicate of touches. Then he and Keane combine on a second give-and-go, with Keane finishing this time too.

The final whistle blows. Gray has destroyed yellow 7-1, and Gerrard has contributed to five of the goals. He might not be his former self, pyrotechnic, but there's still plenty of grace in him, especially here, among the apprentices.

"His passing is incredible," Keane says. "He finds you in those little pockets."

After a shower and a bite of lunch, Gerrard surfaces inside the stadium for his introductory news conference. He looks relaxed up onstage, sitting between Arena and Klein, before a house packed with reporters and cameras.

Gerrard does most of the talking. He uses the word "fantastic" a lot. He knows that the comparisons to Beckham are inevitable, and he also knows that they are somewhat unkind; despite his five-year, \$50 million contract, Beckham scored



"I'M USED T
KIT ON

just 18 goals in 98 regular-season appearances. Gerrard wants it known that he will produce. "I've come here to win," he says. "If there's anyone out there who thinks I'm here for a holiday and a last paycheck, they'll be proved wrong very soon." He's asked about the move from Liverpool to Los Angeles, the literal and metaphorical oceans between them, and he makes a joke about his newfound respect for sunscreen. "Factor 50," he says. "I got it off Keane-o." His only wobble comes when he's asked what he'll miss about Liverpool, the team that's held every ounce of his aspiration and affection since he was a boy.

"Me teammates," he says. "The club. ... Everyone knows Liverpool will always be in my heart."

Then Gerrard catches himself, like the captain of a ship who has suddenly noticed he's off course. "But for me now it's all about fighting for a new badge."

After, Arena is asked about what he might do to help his latest star adapt—how he might guarantee a multimillionaire, a 17-year professional footballer with a perfect blond wife and three perfect blond daughters, a gentler transition to this new life of his, the same as his old life, only sunnier and quieter and easier. Arena casts a sideways glance. "I'm

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STEVEN GERRARD AND HIS TIME WITH
THE LA GALAXY, GO TO ESPNF.CM



NO PUTTING THAT LIVERPOOL —27 YEARS IS A LONG TIME.”

STEVEN GERRARD

going to make sure I warm up a bottle of milk for him,” he says, and he smiles, though only a little.

THERE IS A box of huge cookies sitting on the table when Gerrard walks up. It’s July 10, and he’s retreated to the stadium’s Champions Lounge, down in the basement. It’s mostly empty, just a few tables, no chairs, with a glass cabinet of trophies on the wall. With five MLS Cup championships, the Galaxy are the most successful team in league history, and there is the shining hardware to prove it. There are also these cookies. “No thanks, first game tomorrow,” Gerrard says. Soon, though, he opens the box, closes the box, opens it again and then finally steals a piece of cookie about the size of a quarter. “I didn’t demonstrate great mental strength there, did I?” he says.

He has been asked and has answered every possible question over the preceding days, and he’s feeling a little as though there’s nothing more for him to say. His girls have finished school back in Liverpool and made the long trip west with his mother, and he’s eager to spend time with them. Gerrard took his family to the Santa Monica Pier, and he marveled at how anonymous he was. He was almost startled by the absence of startles, as

though he now faces a different kind of culture shock: He has to recalibrate what’s possible and not possible for him anymore, not just as a player but also as a man.

“I had an opportunity to call it a day at Liverpool,” he says. “I got an unbelievable farewell. It was a very emotional time. But I just didn’t want it to end. I love the game, and I wanted to play on for some more time, try to create more memories. That’s why I’ve carried on. But I think I’m going to have the same feelings if I call it a day in 18 months. Football is me life. So I’m going to be stuck. I’m going to be stuck.”

He tries to explain more that terrible feeling, that curse of all great athletes: the insatiable desire to continue to do the thing you were born to do, even after time and logic tell you that you’ve done the best of it. It’s a complicated, conflicting sensation, when the watchers start talking about your legacy and how you’re spoiling it—as though past achievements are erased by present failures—and yet you don’t feel you’ve reached anything like the end. “It’s inside you,” Gerrard says. “At the moment, I’m still feeling healthy, strong, I’m enjoying it, you know? I could have come and had a year in LA and rented a

place and got up every day and sat on the beach. But it’s inside my DNA that I love football and I love winning. If I don’t get any success here, I’ll be going home a very disappointed man.”

He is a man who wears his disappointments the way rodeo cowboys wear their fears, having given up pretending that they can conceal them. The way Gerrard’s time with Liverpool finished—a 3-1 loss to Crystal Palace at Anfield, a 6-1 defeat on the road at Stoke—was far from dreamlike, but those defeats were tiny trembles compared with the more seismic pressures he has sustained.

“It was a horrific finish,” he says of his last days in red. “It was a painful finish. We weren’t good enough. But I have to look at the big picture of the last 17 years. Liverpool were never the favorites to win any of the competitions that we won. We proved an awful lot of people wrong and achieved things that weren’t in my wildest dreams. At the same time, we had some really crushing blows and lows that will stay with me and scar me for the rest of my life. But that’s football. It’s not a journey of highs all the way through. It’s setbacks. It’s lows. Them setbacks and them lows drive you on to achieve better things. So I’m hoping the cruel ending, the bit of a tough ending the last few games, will help drive me on to achieve success while I’m here.”

He has said that not a day goes by without his thinking of his infamous slip that allowed Chelsea to score a critical goal during 2014’s failed league title run, and there’s something tragic about that, considering he’s also the man who led the Miracle at Istanbul—Liverpool’s come-from-behind win for its fifth European Cup. Is the move to LA a way to give himself not only physical distance from Liverpool and its mixed history but also mental deliverance from it?

“I think the whole arrival here gives me a chance for a fresh start,” he says. “But the way I am, and what helps me to be consistent in my game, is to always think about the times when it hasn’t gone well—think about the times when I’ve missed out and it’s been painful. I think it would be very disrespectful of me to just dismiss that slip or those times when we haven’t been good enough and forget about them totally, because it means so much to Liverpool supporters. It will always be with me.”

When he’s asked for his happiest memory from Liverpool, countless images and moments race through his head. But as he said in his farewell speech at Anfield, today it’s not the ending that surfaces first but the beginning.

“It’s gone over in a flash,” he says, and he’s

shaking his head at the time that's passed. "I remember being 8 years of age and getting two buses to a facility in Anfield just to train with the under-8s. I remember the very first days there, and the dream back then was just to play for Liverpool. Me dad was a huge Liverpool fan, me brother was a huge Liverpool fan. The pressure was building each year as I was staying there: Will he do it, will he get there? When you run out there for the first time in a Liverpool kit, as a professional for the first team, it's the best night of your life."

And now, in a little more than 24 hours, after 27 years, he will play his first game for a new team again.

"It felt strange doing a couple of photo shoots with the new kit on, but I'm sure I'll adapt and get used to it. But yeah, I'm used to putting that Liverpool kit on. To go all in white is completely different, but once the game starts and the whistle goes, it's a normal service regime for me. It's me job. It's the job I've been doing full time since I left school at 16.

"That's why I'm here. You talk about me packing bags now in 18 months, going home and retiring and never going onto the pitch with a gang of boys to win a football match—that's like someone taking a lot of me life away."

He might be nearly done talking, but he's still managed to talk himself into never leaving, never confronting that finish of finishes, both surprising and inevitable, when he'll never be asked to play the game again. These next 18 months will feel as unfamiliar as his life ever has, but in a larger, more meaningful way, nothing will change for him here. He begins drifting away from the table, waving his arms as though he were calling for backup, to go upstairs and make the case for Steven Gerrard to be allowed to play forever.

"Let's go tell Bruce and Chris now we should extend this contract. Come on, come on. Let's go."

He returns to the table and sighs. "I have to cross that bridge when we come to it, but I don't think I'll be ready in 18 months either."

His eyes return to the box of cookies. He sneaks another little piece, this one the size of a dime.

"Don't tell Bruce," he says.

THE NEXT NIGHT, July 11, Gerrard makes his debut for the Galaxy in a friendly against top Liga MX side Club America. He stands out on the field, thin and slightly duck-footed, an ordinary man who became extraordinary and is fighting to keep from being ordinary again, a comet's fight.

His first touch comes straight from the kickoff, the ball given to him by Keane. He sends a long,

beautiful pass to Dan Gargan, curling the ball across the field. Were Gerrard watching instead of playing, he would be applauding right now. Instead he's running forward, looking over his shoulders, calling offsides, moving his teammates like chess pieces.

Club America scores early and dominates play, but slowly LA shifts the momentum. A little more than 20 minutes in, Gerrard receives a solid pass and charges into the box, pounding a left-footed shot toward the far side of the goal. The Club America keeper makes a diving save, and Gerrard hops up the way young boys do when they're let down, that strange mix of adrenaline and dejection that comes with a near miss.

Later, not long before half, Keane scores a wonderful goal, collecting a massive clearance from Juninho with his left foot, hitting the brakes, shifting his weight and relaying the ball into the right side of the empty net. He stands triumphant, and Gerrard gives him a hug, the first of however many embraces they will share.



Even with his face plastered on billboards, Gerrard [with wife Alex] feels refreshingly anonymous in LA.

Both will be subbed off at half. LA will win 2-1, with much grander joy soon to come, including Gerrard's first MLS goal less than a week later, a right-footed strike in a 5-2 victory against San Jose. He will wear Liverpool shin pads that night, and he will pretend not to hear Arena, hollering from the sideline, asking how he's holding up. He will say he felt like a kid out there. "I don't want to come off," he will say. "I want to play as much football as I can." This will be the future he might not have lived.

But for now the score is tied, and the game against Club America has been hard-fought. Just before the whistle, Gerrard is taken down roughly, and he doesn't much care for the insult, having learned how important all of this is to him and how easily everything might be stripped away. The first half ends, and he pauses to catch his breath before he jogs in his whites back to the locker room. "It was a great feeling," he says later, the sting of the tackle fast fading, an inconsequential part of the whole. Steven Gerrard is a happy man. He's just spent 45 more minutes on the grass, under lights, creating chances and memories. He's just gone one more time onto the pitch with a gang of boys to win a football match. ■



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COLLEGE FOOTBALL PREVIEW 2015



FOOTBALL AT ITS most basic is about opposing forces: a running back hitting his stride to barrel over a linebacker charging at full steam. This season is no different. It's about a coaching conflict in the sport's most storied rivalry: Michigan's Jim Harbaugh, shirtless agitator, attempting to unnerve Ohio State's Urban Meyer. It's about a clash of quarterback styles: Penn State's Christian Hackenberg, an NFL prototype bent on proving that his poor stats—and dual-threat QBs—are a fluke. It's about the collision of past and future: the Oklahoma drill embodying the game's primal beauty and horrifying impact. And it's about standing your ground: the defending champion Buckeyes staving off the SEC (eight teams in our Top 25) to officially shift the balance of college football power.

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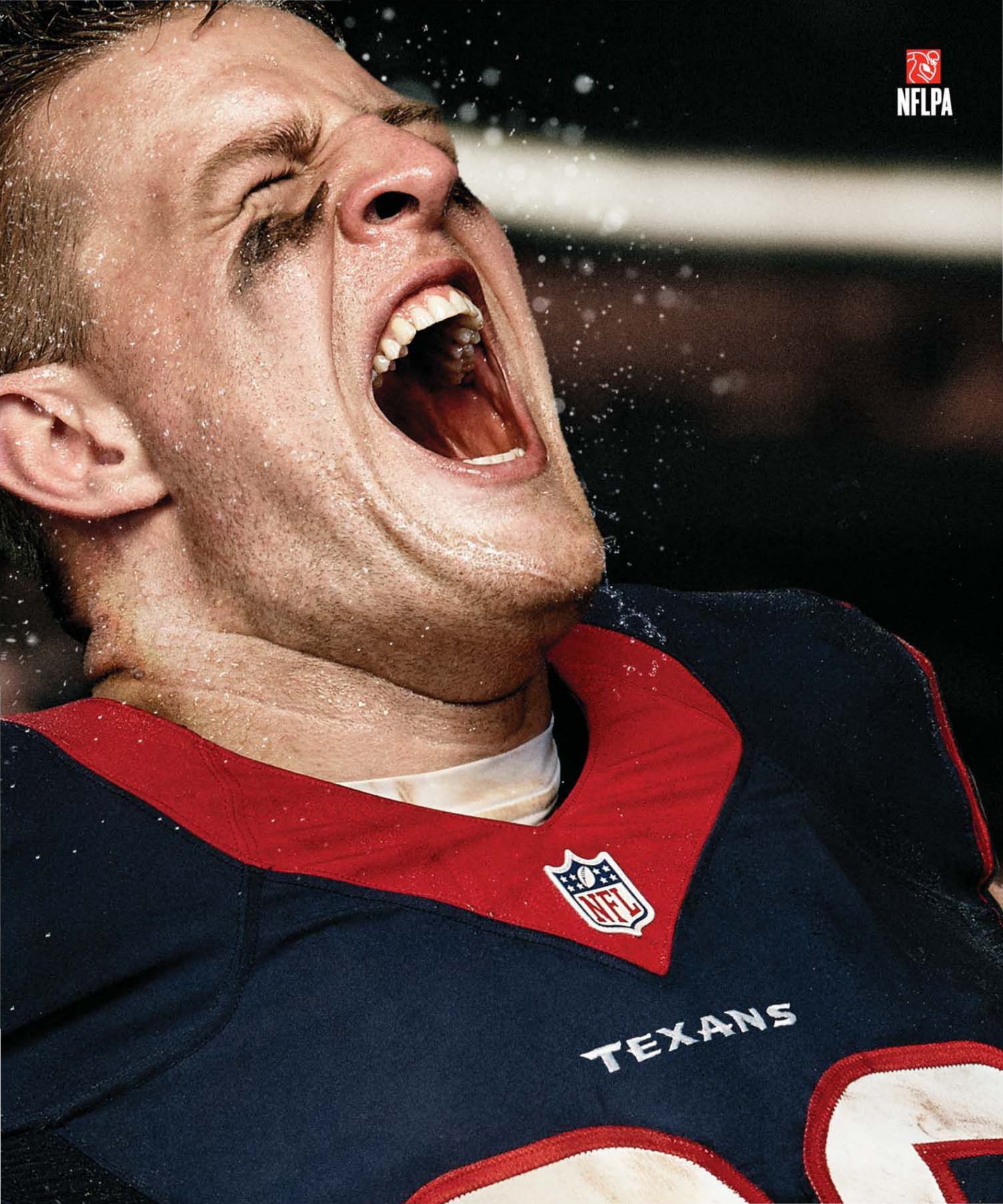
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COLLEGE FOOTBALL PREVIEW 2015

NATURAL BORN RIVALS

Jim Harbaugh and Urban Meyer have long been destined to lead the game's most storied rivalry. But even they're surprised to learn of their remarkable shared history.

BY BRETT FORREST

ILLUSTRATION BY BUTCHER BILLY





Harbaugh inherits a Michigan program that hasn't won the Big Ten in more than a decade.

You don't have to travel to Ann Arbor to catch the Jim Harbaugh show. If you live near a high school football field, Harbaugh will come to you. In June, the new Michigan coach toured the country, stirring excitement and controversy equally by orchestrating nine prep camps in six other states. Who would've known that Michigan football has struggled for nearly a decade? Like a magician with a silk handkerchief fluttering from one hand and a coin palmed in the other, Harbaugh has induced the public to focus on the wrong object: himself. His sleight of hand has been so deft that you might believe for a moment that Michigan, and not Ohio State, won college football's first-ever playoff.

But if you do find your way to Ann Arbor, you'll realize how Harbaugh has re-energized college football without coaching a game. Here at Schembechler Hall, a gallery of artifacts eulogizes rosier days—cable-knit jerseys in maize and faded blue, trophies and Tom Harmon's tattered-and-torn No. 98. No séance will raise these departed souls. But there isn't a coach who understands the spirits of this program as well as Harbaugh, nor one as willing to risk his reputation to revive it.

On this afternoon in June, shortly after returning from his tour, Harbaugh is speaking quietly with a prep tight end from Massachusetts. Over the recruit's left shoulder, he detects a reporter with a notepad loitering outside his office. His eyes

widen, possibly in recognition of colliding forces. Recruiting. Publicity. And the curtain lifts.

"Gimme the ball!"

Harbaugh jumps to a stance, knees flexed, arms out. He backs his rear end into the recruit's hip, bumps him off balance, boxing him out. "Basketball's great for a tight end," he says. His voice carries down the corridor. "Catch the ball. Get some reps." He raises his hands and calls for a pass.

No one is sure what to do. Not the kid. Not his parents. Not Harbaugh's assistant coaches, mustering to the sound. They all stare, as one does at a man up onstage courageously risking foolishness in search of inspiration. Suddenly, as if scripted, another recruit appears.

"Hey, you play basketball?" Harbaugh yells. He leaps toward the new recruit, posting him up. "Wait," the kid says, confused. "Are you on offense or defense?" Harbaugh's neck swells. "I'm getting the ball!" he says. There is no ball. This fact now self-evident, Harbaugh ultimately straightens, fixes his eye on some distant object, then ambles onward to further duty. (The tight end, three-star recruit Sean McKeon, enjoyed the display enough to commit the next day.)

Detractors claim that Harbaugh plays to effect. At a camp in Alabama, for instance, he trotted the fields bare-chested, jumping into the fray with potential recruits. Others say that Harbaugh is insensible to the ever-present lenses. Still a third option exists: Maybe he is a performer by disposition.

"I'm about as transparent as a baggie,"



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QUOTABLE HARBAUGH: THE MICHIGAN MAN

"We're going to play in the Rose Bowl this year. I guarantee it. We'll beat Ohio State, and we'll be in Pasadena Jan. 1."

Harbaugh, then Michigan's senior QB, preparing to face Ohio State on Nov. 22, 1986. The Wolverines would win 26-24 as 22-year-old Buckeyes graduate assistant Urban Meyer looked on.

"Michigan is a good school, and I got a good education there, but the athletic department has ways to get borderline guys in. ... They're adulated when they're playing, but when they get out, the people who adulated them won't hire them."

Harbaugh, then Stanford's coach, addressing Michigan's academic standards in 2007, prompting then-UM running back Mike Hart to say, "He's not a Michigan man."

"... if you cheat to win, then you've already lost, according to Bo Schembechler. And Bo Schembechler is about next to the word of God as you can get, in my mind."

Harbaugh, then the 49ers' coach, after a Seahawks player was suspended before the 2013 season. It was the sixth suspension (five were upheld) under former USC rival Pete Carroll.

Harbaugh says. What isn't so clear, though, is why Jim Harbaugh has become the provocateur of football coaching. But that he is. Before the arrival of Harbaugh, there was no personality strong enough to compete with Urban Meyer. A new, intensified period in the program has begun—just as when Bo had Woody and Fielding had Knute, the balance of power in college football is once again poised to shift to the Midwest.

Later in his office, after posting up the prep, Harbaugh is present, though little more, his eyes darkly leveled on a greater burden. He sits against a backdrop of winged helmets and stray mementos (one plaque advises simplicity: **JUST COACH THE TEAM**), declining to concede anything about the importance of beating Ohio State, much less Meyer. "It could be a nameless, faceless opponent," he says.

Harbaugh and Meyer met for the first time at an annual Big Ten coaches meeting in February, and they're still learning to become rivals. But dig deeper into the record books and a shared history unfolds along the Ohio-Michigan border—a history that might indicate where this rivalry is headed.

NOVEMBER 1986, DAYS before facing Ohio State, Michigan's senior quarterback Jim Harbaugh: "We're going to play in the Rose Bowl this year. I guarantee it. We'll beat Ohio State, and we'll be in Pasadena Jan. 1."

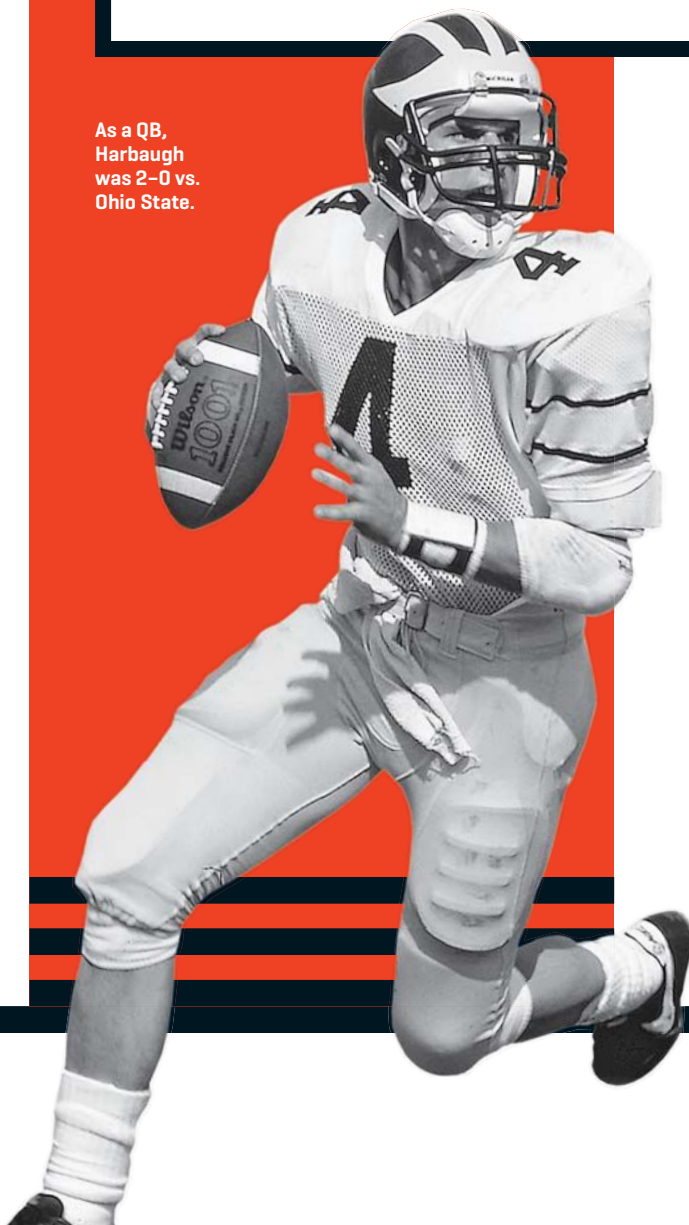
"I was sick as a dog," Harbaugh says, remembering that trip 200 miles south to Columbus. "Hundred-and-something [fever]. Got food poisoning. Just all night throwing up. I think I slept an hour."

The next afternoon, ignorant of the opposing quarterback's sickly feeling, a graduate assistant for the Buckeyes was just happy to be part of the rivalry. It was the first year in college coaching

"In my America, you're allowed to cross state borders. That's the America I know."

Harbaugh, defending UM's satellite camp tour this summer. Attending high school camps more than 50 miles from a university's campus is outlawed in other conferences, giving Big Ten coaches a perceived recruiting edge. As a "collegial" gesture, Harbaugh had invited every coach in America to attend.

As a QB, Harbaugh was 2-0 vs. Ohio State.



for Urban Meyer, a 22-year-old Ohio kid on the staff of Earle Bruce.

"I was a GA by pay but full-time by responsibility," Meyer recalls. "They were having a good year, but they lost to Minnesota. So all we had to do was win and we go to the Rose Bowl. ... I can't tell you my phone number or address, but I can tell you all the plays."

Especially the one that provided the margin. In the fourth quarter, Harbaugh handed the ball to seldom-used tailback Thomas Wilcher. A Detroit product, Wilcher had found greater success in the high hurdles, winning an NCAA championship. But on this day, he didn't need to leap, simply plowing the ball seven yards over the goal line to put the Wolverines up 26-17. They would hold on for a 26-24 victory.

IN THE JUNE drizzle, Wilcher attends to the sidelines of Dakota High School in the Detroit suburb of Macomb. More than 1,000 prospects looking for scholarships clap in unison. The Sound Mind Sound Body camp might be the country's best gathering of recruits—and coaches.

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In three years at Ohio State, Meyer has three losses ... none to Michigan.



Meyer will be here. Harbaugh too. And Michigan State's Mark Dantonio, and Brian Kelly from Notre Dame, as well as Penn State's James Franklin.

Dressed in a green pullover and baseball hat, Wilcher is too stout these days to clear a hurdle, but he still finds himself central to the fortunes of Michigan and Ohio State. Wilcher is the coach at Cass Technical High School, and although Detroit might no longer be the factory town it once was, Cass Tech stamps out top preps with industrial regularity. Players have generally rolled off the line to Ann Arbor, but the recent rise in Columbus has altered the supply chain, placing Wilcher squarely between Harbaugh and Meyer.

Last year Cass Tech running back Mike Weber was considered the best recruit in Michigan, a 5-foot-10, 210-pound bruiser with elite speed. "Mikey's heart was at Michigan," Wilcher says. Weber committed to previous UM coach Brady Hoke, but when last season disintegrated in Ann Arbor, Weber reconsidered.

Wilcher walks the fields coaching the kids. He passes Dantonio, who won the Rose Bowl in 2014 and this year's Cotton Bowl yet still is drowned out by whatever fuss Michigan happens to make. Dantonio's scowl of the disregarded is deepening. Wilcher keeps walking, past Kelly, who stands under a tent, out of the rain, where he endures a shower of questions from a few website guys with a camera:

"Would you rather be a dragon or ride a dragon?" one of them asks.

"Ride a dragon," Kelly says, his face enduring.

"Taylor Swift or Ariana Grande?"

"Taylor Swift."

Kelly and his colleagues must play along in this paddock session of modern coaching, lest they appear distant, out of touch. They have to seem like kids but adults also. Although it is possible that 51-year-old Harbaugh enjoys listening to Lil Wayne, perhaps there is more to

his gift of a personalized Michigan jersey, which former QB Denard Robinson handed off to the rapper before a recent Detroit concert.

Wilcher continues his rounds, passing Buckeyes cornerbacks and special-teams coach Kerry Coombs, who looks like a living flag of Ohio State, scarlet golf shirt, head of gray hair. During Meyer's first season in 2012, there were only two players from Michigan on the roster. He knew well the Wolverines' long-held practice of poaching talent from Ohio. So he charged Coombs with returning the favor. "It was strategic," says Coombs, a longtime Ohio high school coach. "How can you ignore a bordering state if they have great football players?" The first time Coombs flew into Detroit, also in OSU gear, the attendant at the rental counter claimed he had run out of cars.

On Dec. 8, two days after Ohio State had won the Big Ten title, Coombs, Meyer and running backs coach Stan Drayton visited Cass Tech to sell Wilcher and Weber on Columbus. Weber quickly committed. His pledge was solid—for 20 days—until Michigan hired Harbaugh. "Mike's family told him to listen to what Harbaugh had to say," Wilcher says. "He liked what he said. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't eat. It's the effect that Harbaugh brought to the table."

On Jan. 15, Tyrone Wheatley visited Weber. If there was anyone who could identify with the top player in Michigan, it was Wheatley, who himself had been a Detroit-area back and the state's No. 1 recruit in 1991. Wheatley would become the Big Ten Offensive POY in Ann Arbor before spending a decade in the NFL. Weber's recruitment was so critical to Harbaugh—for the roster, for perception—that he dispatched Wheatley to work the kid a few days before hiring Wheatley as running backs coach.

"It became a street fight to get him at the end," Meyer says. On Feb. 3, the night before national signing day, Weber was on the phone with Harbaugh and Wheatley. Then Weber called Wilcher with news. "Around 1 in the morning on signing day, he called Ohio State and said, 'I'm going to Michigan,'" Wilcher says.

The OSU coaches continued to reason with Weber, according to Wilcher, Drayton most diligently of all. He informed Weber that Karan Higdon, a back from Sarasota, Florida, was about to

flip from Iowa to Michigan. As the night wore on, Wilcher says, Weber felt increasingly isolated. Harbaugh's NFL pedigree was enticing, but why hadn't he said anything about Higdon?

The following afternoon, as Weber marched to the podium at his news conference, he confided in Wilcher: "Coach, I'm really not sure." Wilcher put it to him straight: "Mike, now is the time when you need to make a decision." Weber flipped one final time and signed with Ohio State.

The next afternoon, the Chicago Bears announced that they had hired Drayton away from OSU. Weber immediately tweeted: "I'm hurt as hell I ain't gone lie." Says Wilcher: "Mikey is still confused." According to Meyer, he was caught off guard: "The day after signing day, [Drayton] says, 'I want to go look at this job.' And then I get the call that he's going to take it. I didn't think about recruiting."

But let's not be naive about the stakes in the business of this game. Two years ago, Dantonio hired Curtis Blackwell, founder of the Sound Mind Sound Body camp and former assistant at Detroit's Martin Luther King High School, to aid Michigan State in recruiting. Earlier this year, Harbaugh hired Chris Partridge, the coach at New Jersey's Paramus Catholic High School, to do the same at Michigan. Defensive tackle Rashan Gary, the No. 1 player in the ESPN 300 rankings, will be a senior at Paramus Catholic this fall.

While the carousel spun in Columbus and Weber was left to wonder about his



decision, Harbaugh took the stage, tweeting on Feb. 7: “Thought of the day—What a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive! —Sir Walter Scott.” To be clear, he wasn’t talking about Iowa’s losing Higdon to Michigan. Regarding Weber, Harbaugh now says: “Was it a priority? Sure. Did that one leave a bruise? Yes. Did we get our nose bloodied and our lip split a little on that one? Yes. But today’s a new day. We’re back competing at it again.”

Meyer had beaten Harbaugh but in doing so had damaged his own standing in Michigan. “I spoke with Meyer,” Wilcher says. “I told him, ‘I get texts every day calling me a traitor. I went down to your camp and put on Ohio State s---. I’m from Michigan. My kids are from Michigan. You have to be honest if we’re going to continue to have a good relationship.’”

A ripple of recognition runs through the camp. In a side room of the high school, like a substitute teacher finally finding a class, Meyer quietly appears. He’s wearing the wrong colors in enemy territory, but that’d be hard to tell. The glare of a national championship ring tends to make people colorblind.

Standing against a wall in an OSU golf shirt, bottle of water in hand, chatting, Meyer catches sight of Coombs, who extends his right hand to the boss. Meyer steps forward and slaps it. With that loose, easy smile, Meyer lets out a yell: “Doctor Detroit!”

ROUTE 23 RUNS from Columbus to Ann Arbor, tying one campus to the other and eventually Harbaugh to Meyer. “It seemed like the longest drive,” Wheatley says of his trips south on the Wolverines’ team bus. Sometimes there is a valley. Often the road lies flat. It always carries on, though, same as this rivalry.

“WHEN I WAS 6 YEARS OLD, I THOUGHT ABOUT THIS RIVALRY. IT’S SEARED ON YOUR SOUL, INGRAINED IN YOUR BODY.”

**OHIO STATE COACH
URBAN MEYER**

About 100 miles north of Columbus, Route 6 bisects Route 23 in Gibsonburg, Ohio, like the bottom bar of the uprights. About 12 miles due west on Route 6 lies Bowling Green. Here, Jack Harbaugh, Jim’s father, won a small college division national championship as a player in 1959, then returned as an assistant in 1968. Thirty-three years later, Urban Meyer, then 37, arrived in Bowling Green for his first head-coaching job. Success and potential carried him away after only two seasons, not looping him back to Columbus until a decade later.

About 15 miles due east on Route 6 lies Fremont, Ohio, home to Ross High School. On West State Street, in the warmed-over morning light of Billy’s Coffee Shop, 50 miles southeast of the Michigan border, a man sits down to a plate of eggs. Solomon Woodson started attending games in Ann Arbor in 1967. He still goes, tailgates at the golf course across from Michigan Stadium. Of all those games, one is unlike the others: Nov. 22, 1997, 11 years to the day after Harbaugh guaranteed victory. Michigan was ranked No. 1, Ohio State No. 4. Three rows up, behind the Buckeyes’ bench, Solomon Woodson watched his son, Charles, of Ross High and the Michigan Wolverines, backpedal to the 22-yard line. There he fielded a second-quarter punt. He raced down the opposing sideline, toward the Heisman Trophy, passing his half brother, Shawn Simms, the OSU defensive ends coach, along the way. That is the rivalry—two states, two schools, one family.

Solomon Woodson forks through his plate, back in the present day of Michigan’s troubles. “That’s not a conversation you’d enjoy to have with Charles,” he says. “Charles would say, ‘We expect to beat Ohio State.’” His mood lifts when talk turns to Harbaugh. “It’s the best thing that could have happened. He can say, ‘I played against those guys. I beat those guys.’ He’s for real.”

URBAN MEYER SITS on a couch in his bunkered, windowless office in Columbus. It is quiet. He is remembering.

“We had just lost to Iowa on the last play of the game,” he says. “Earle Bruce was saying, ‘They’re gonna get me, they’re gonna get me.’ I was so young. I didn’t know what he meant.” It was November 1987, the week of the Michigan game. Meyer was readying for practice when a team manager summoned him to this very room.



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PREMIER PARTNER OF



HEISMAN.

“Yeah, not to be rude or anything, but I just want to get back to see if we can’t get better. I don’t feel like I’m getting better right now. Go Blue!”

JIM HARBAUGH, POLITELY, IF ABRUPTLY, ENDING HIS INTERVIEW WITH *THE MAG*

“I walked in,” Meyer says. “Two or three coaches were crying. Earle Bruce was sitting right there.” He points to a bookshelf now overstuffed with volumes. “I stare at it sometimes and think, ‘Holy s---.’” Bruce had been fired. Later that week, in Ann Arbor, Ohio State won Bruce’s final game. In the coaching change to come, Meyer left Columbus. He carried the rivalry with him.

“I was raised in the Ten-Year War,” says Meyer, who was born in Toledo and grew up in Ashtabula, 170 miles to the east. “My dad was a big Woody Hayes guy. So I was born and bred with that staked on your heart.”

Occasionally, Meyer will institute a School Up North week for his players. He distributes Ten-Year War tests. “The Victors” pumps from the speakers in the weight room. Along the hallways of the Woody Hayes building, the displays that commemorate the rivalry feel like a celebration of Ohio State’s recent dominion, 11 wins in the past 13 meetings. Here lies a difference. Since taking over, Harbaugh has cleansed Schembechler Hall of countdown clocks, garb, etc. For Michigan, the goal of reclaiming the rivalry is distant, possibly so daunting that Harbaugh does not want to distract his players from the short-term goal of simply getting better. Perhaps that is why Harbaugh is not effusive when discussing the rivalry. Meanwhile, Meyer waxes all he wants.

“It’s personal,” he says. “When I look across and see the winged helmets and their coaches and their players ... I’ve been in rivalries. Utah-BYU. Bowling Green-Toledo. Florida, we had three: Florida State, Tennessee and Georgia. You make them personal, but they’re not. I didn’t grow up disliking Georgia. When I was 6, I was thinking about this rivalry. This one’s seared on your soul. It’s ingrained through every part of your body.”

Now, in Harbaugh, Meyer must adapt to a competitor whose fervor for the rivalry approximates his own. “I don’t know him,” Meyer says. “I know the name. I know what he’s done. I’m sure when you cut him open, this rivalry’s all over the place. There’s no rivalry between the two of us. But he grew up in the era too. This guy gets it. He was a part of it. This is very personal on both sides.”

Meyer pauses, then continues. “I hear he’s a heck of a motivator. I know when we play them, you better buckle your chin strap as hard as you can because it’s going to be a free-for-all. That’s what I expect out of him.”

Meyer has other assumptions, surely. Stories of the conflict that Harbaugh, then at Stanford, so cleverly instigated with Pete Carroll, then at top-ranked USC, are recounted often within coaching circles. Notably when Harbaugh, who’d just arrived in Palo Alto, incorrectly predicted that Carroll would leave USC in a season. He said he’d heard it from a coach on the Trojans’ staff. (Recruiting. Publicity. The curtain.) There is also the postgame confrontation in 2011 with then-Detroit Lions coach Jim Schwartz, who said later that Harbaugh, despite the 49ers’ winning, had directed an expletive at him during the handshake. And more maddening Harbaugh anecdotes buzz along the coaching world’s party line.

What does this tell us? That Harbaugh makes them nervous. Harbaugh places himself in a rival’s presumed area of propriety, refusing to move, demanding a

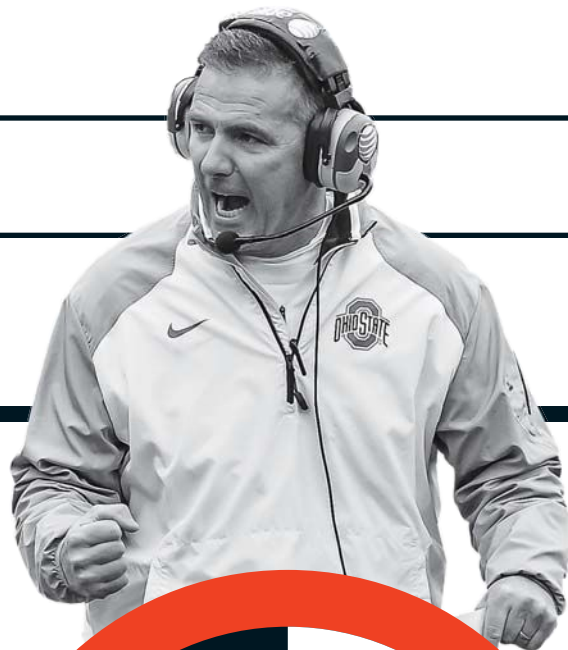
reaction. This is called competitiveness. Meyer knows all about it. He still remembers that Michigan-Ohio State week back in ’86 when Harbaugh guaranteed victory, which outraged college football’s conservative sensibilities—which is exactly what Harbaugh must have wanted. For all this time, Harbaugh has been forcing people to respond to him.

“That’s been brought to my attention a few times by colleagues,” Meyer says. “I’m at the point in my career where I’m good. I guess I’m better at handling situations than I’ve been in the past. So if something does show up, I’m not giving it much thought.” The Ohio State coach smiles. “I’ve been warned.”

THERE IS A KNOT in the rivalry, and Route 23 ties it in the northwest corner of Ohio. The roadway twists up and around Toledo, five miles south of the Michigan border, a place to which Harbaugh and Meyer have always been drawn.

Central Catholic High School coach Greg Dempsey sits in the press box, overseeing his team’s summer camp. But winter is on the mind. The winter of 2002, when Meyer, then the coach at Bowling Green, stopped by. School was out for a snow day. The two hit a diner. “Urban was different from everybody else back then,” Dempsey says. “He knew my life story. He was into building a relationship.” A year or so later, Harbaugh, then the coach at the University of San Diego, showed up. “He came all the way out here,” Dempsey says, shaking his head. There was a school picnic. They ate pizza. “He’s instantly returned Michigan to what it was without even playing.”

As Dempsey discusses the rejuvenated rivalry, two of Central Catholic’s star players from last season’s 6A state title team join him. Michael Warren, a 5-10, 185-pound back, rushed for 2,246 yards as a sophomore. James Hudson, also a rising junior, could be an even more



valued recruit, a 6-5, 260-pound defensive end with power and agility. Coaches from Ohio State and Michigan have visited in recent months, making their faces known.

Hudson and Warren are Ohio kids. Hudson tweeted a picture of them in scarlet-and-gray gear from the Woody Hayes building. But they have learned enough about the recruiting game to understand that the best team in the land isn't always the best team for them to land on. "I'd rather be on an up-and-coming team," Hudson says. When Michigan hired Harbaugh, Warren's father cautioned him to keep an open mind. "Think about how many kids it's their dream to go to the NFL," Warren says. "And he knows everybody there."

But blue chips alone don't make Toledo a landmark on this trip along Route 23. A mile and a half from Central Catholic is the old Mercy Hospital. Decades ago, a Mercy physician, William Wiedemann, was the team doctor for Central Catholic. In the fall, he would attend home games, the field so unlike the hospital's sterile passageways. In the summer lull, on July 10, 1964, at Mercy, Wiedemann delivered a baby boy, Urban Frank Meyer III.

On its way out of Toledo, two and a half miles south of the Michigan border, Route 23 runs by Bigby Coffee on North McCord Road. Inside sits Sue Crandall, one of Wiedemann's daughters, who has short white hair. "Oh, Dad would have gotten a kick out of this," she says. She never knew that the Ohio State coach was among the children that her father, gone these 47 years, had guided into life. "He liked football. He was competitive." Crandall thinks back over how little has changed, from Bo and Woody to Jim and Urban. "They treat these coaches like gods."

ALTHOUGH HARBAUGH HAS yet to coach a game at Michigan, his name and the debate of what's to come can be heard along Ann Arbor's pathways and in its summer-session classrooms and in bars that stretch beyond South University

88.9%

THE BIGGER THEY ARE

Urban Meyer is a gaudy 24-3 in rivalry games as a head coach.

BOWLING GREEN (2001-02)

vs. Toledo

WINS 1 LOSSES 1

UTAH (2003-04)

vs. Utah State

WINS 2 LOSSES 0

vs. BYU

WINS 2 LOSSES 0

FLORIDA (2005-10)

vs. Tennessee

WINS 6 LOSSES 0

vs. Georgia

WINS 5 LOSSES 1

vs. Florida State

WINS 5 LOSSES 1

OHIO STATE (2012-)

vs. Michigan

WINS 3 LOSSES 0

Avenue. Such is the thrill of anticipation.

Harbaugh carries the weight of it. Tucked into his office among the fields and arenas at the south end of campus, the Michigan coach minimizes expectations. "Our strategy would be to get better today than we were yesterday," he says. "Get better tomorrow than we were today. 'Improvement will lead to success' theory. So simple that it just may work." These words give meaning to his removal of countdown clocks. Harbaugh allows his players to focus inwardly, which is as simple as any coach could make it.

He politely considers the question of Ohio State, yet he declines to grant the rivalry increased significance. "You want to be better than them," he says. "It's not fun to have other people think you're not as good as they are. That fuels the whole thing. We want to win. We want to win that game."

Then there is the question of Meyer. What role could a personal conflict play? Harbaugh keeps it simpler still—in his way.

"Your objective is the same," he says. "You want to win. Ten-tenths, you want to win. If you know him, does that make you want to win eleven-tenths? In that movie *Spinal Tap*, remember the guy talks about, 'This goes to 11'? It doesn't. It's 10 out of 10. It's 100 percent. That's as high as it goes. You can't give 110. The point is, because you know somebody, or because you have some kind of personal—I mean, I played against my brother in the Super Bowl. Whether he was my brother or somebody I didn't know, it doesn't raise the level of how much you want to win."

Then talk drifts south, to Route 23. In the early 1960s, Meyer's father, Urban II, was raising a family in Toledo and working as a chemical engineer at the Hilton-Davis Sterling Drug Co. At the same time, Harbaugh's father, Jack, served as an assistant at Perrysburg High School, where Route 23 performs a buttonhook westward around the city. Until today in his office, Harbaugh is unaware that the men lived 10 miles apart. But it is the next revelation that compels him to pick up his phone and betrays the fact that personal connections

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

New Michigan coach Jim Harbaugh has a steep hill to climb to beat defending champion Ohio State in his first year. Fortunately for the Wolverines, Harbaugh is a man who honors traditions, presumably including the one that says rookie Wolverines coaches beat the Buckeyes.

MICHIGAN FIRST-YEAR HEAD COACHES HAVE A WINNING PERCENTAGE OF .821 AGAINST OHIO STATE.

11-2-1

OHIO STATE FIRST-YEAR HEAD COACHES HAVE A WINNING PERCENTAGE OF .368 AGAINST MICHIGAN.

6-11-2

do register with him.

A woman answers on the coach's speakerphone. "Hey, Mother," Harbaugh replies, "it's your son, Jim."

"What's going on?" says Jackie Harbaugh, her voice cheerily crackling to life through the speaker.

"I'm here with *ESPN The Magazine*. ... I guess the interesting part of the story is that Urban Meyer and I were born at the same hospital six months apart." Jackie answers quickly. "It wouldn't have been the same doctor, though."

"No, it wasn't the same doctor," Jim says before further revealing his curiosity. "What was the Michigan-Ohio State rivalry in Toledo at that time?"

"Listen, we were 23, 24 years old. I didn't have a whole lot of time to think about Michigan and Ohio State. ... I just respected Woody and Bo. They were from a different generation of coaches where you went by a handshake when you went there to coach. You know what I mean? Your word was a handshake then. And today, people don't respect a handshake anymore."

"I still do. All right, Mom, thank you."

"Love you. Take care."

"Love you, Mom. Bye."

Harbaugh hangs up.

"Hmm," he says. "How 'bout that? That's pretty cool." Harbaugh suddenly wants to know more about Urban Meyer: "Was he older?" Learning that he himself got half a year head start in the race, Harbaugh, the competitor, grins. Or maybe it is a scowl.

After a while, there's nothing more to discuss, at least not in Harbaugh's mind. He grabs the arms of his chair. "Yeah," he says, in an exasperated whisper.

"Yeah." He lifts himself to his feet. He makes for the door, talking as he goes. "Not to be rude or anything, but I just want to get back to—see if we can't get better," he says. "I don't know if I'm getting better right now. I don't feel like I'm getting better right now." Harbaugh walks down the hall. He lifts a fist in the air. "Go Blue!"

WHEN OHIO STATE'S convoy of buses crossed the state line into Michigan, following Route 23 through the town of Whiteford, Woody Hayes would stand up, face the seats and say, "We have entered enemy territory."

From there, it's 35 miles north to Washtenaw Avenue, where Route 23 exhausts its narrative utility. Four miles west, Michigan Stadium sits empty—except for Section 12, Row 67, Seats 1 and 2. This is where John Baldoni has positioned himself for 20 years of fall Saturdays. Baldoni runs his own consulting firm and is the author of more than a dozen books on leadership, a certified observer of Michigan's struggles. "No one was acknowledging the problems," Baldoni says. "As a leadership person, that's what bothered me."

Baldoni was born in Ann Arbor while his father, Paul, was studying at the University of Michigan Medical School. After receiving his degree, Paul Baldoni relocated his family to Ohio, entering practice in Perrysburg, 11 miles south of Toledo. He remained a supporter of the team up north. "Dad enjoyed tweaking his doctor friends," John Baldoni says. "He would bet a friend, an OSU dental school grad, \$100 every year on the outcome." Paul Baldoni had no inkling that, at Mercy Hospital, he had delivered a baby boy, James Joseph Harbaugh, who would one day influence the results of future friendly wagers. John Baldoni looks over the Big House. He talks about Charles Woodson's runback, 18 years ago, the confidence that Michigan carried into those games only a recollection. "I was sick for a day when they hired Urban Meyer," Baldoni says. "A brilliant move. Hiring Jim was equally brilliant. The two of them—this could be a great rivalry. We're in for something special. Jim's enthusiasm is contagious. It'll rub off. He'll bring the glory back."

BEFORE THE PROSPECTS take the field at the Sound Mind Sound Body camp, Thomas Wilcher walks into a classroom at Dakota High School. A crowd gathers for a news conference.

Wilcher locates Meyer. "Coach, you know who I am?" Meyer nods. The two shake hands. "Who else you got coming up?" Meyer asks. Wilcher grins. Leverage in a relationship is hard to deny.

There is a stir in the room. Heads turn. Conversations pause. Harbaugh walks in, wearing maize and blue. He sees Meyer and heads right over.

Harbaugh greets Wilcher, his old friend from Michigan's '86 backfield. Harbaugh and Meyer shake hands, for just the second time. They stand and look at each other, exhaling.

Harbaugh says something, briefly. Meyer does too. Their dialogue is lost to the resumed, performed chatter of the room. Harbaugh's face is tense, serious. Maybe he is just worn out from the road. But this is Harbaugh, so one can never tell what came before, or what's about to come now.

Then Harbaugh says something else, his words audible. It is a fragment of conversation. "Shirts and skins." No doubt, it's a reference to his stunt at the camp in Alabama.

Meyer laughs. He reaches out and slaps Harbaugh playfully in the right shoulder. The tension of the room deflates. Few people are so alike as one football coach is to another. Most of all, in their propensity to perform, even for each other.

But they all know that summer is the time for backslaps. Come the last Saturday in November, Ohio State will travel 200 miles up Route 23 to resume an old rivalry and to shake hands at the end. To Harbaugh and Meyer, those are the only connections that will matter. ■



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COLLEGE
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SURVIVAL OF THE

Remember way back in the summer of 2014 when the Big Ten was toothless and the inaugural thrive? Crazy, right? Sure, our theory of last season's from ESPN Insiders Phil Steele, Brad Edwards, how 2015 will develop. And this time



1

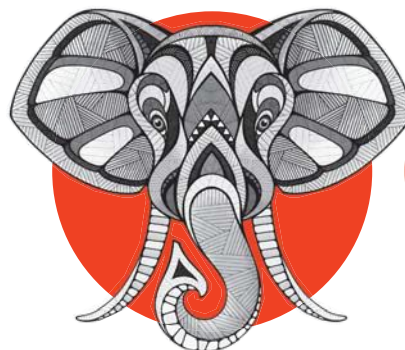
OHIO STATE
BUCKEYES



4

BAYLOR
BEARS

ESPN POWER RANKINGS TOP 25



1 OHIO STATE
2 TCU
3 AUBURN
4 BAYLOR
5 ALABAMA



6 OREGON
7 USC
8 MICHIGAN STATE
9 FLORIDA STATE
10 GEORGIA



11 UCLA
12 NOTRE DAME
13 CLEMSON
14 LSU
15 OLE MISS

TOP 25 VOTERS Kevin Carter, ESPN analyst, former Florida defensive end; Butch Davis, ESPN analyst, former coach at Miami and North Carolina; Heather Dinich, ESPN staff writer; Brad Edwards, ESPN Radio *College GameDay* analyst, ESPN Insider; Chris Fallica, ESPN senior researcher, "The Bear" on *College GameDay*; Rod Gilmore, ESPN analyst, former Stanford cornerback; Travis Haney, ESPN Insider writer; Danny Kanell, ESPN analyst, former Florida State quarterback; Chris Low, ESPN senior writer; Ivan Maisel, ESPN senior writer; Ryan McGee, ESPN senior writer; Adam Rittenberg, ESPN staff writer; Mark Schlachach, ESPN senior writer

JIVAL FITTEST

we knew the Noles were at the top of the food chain, College Football Playoff really needed eight teams to evolution was a little off. But now, with some help Brock Huard and Sharon Katz, we can foresee exactly we already know—it's gonna be nuts!



16 STANFORD
17 ARIZONA STATE
18 ARIZONA
19 WISCONSIN
20 GEORGIA TECH



21 OKLAHOMA
22 ARKANSAS
23 BOISE STATE
24 TENNESSEE
25 TEXAS A&M



2

TCU
HORNED FROGS



3

AUBURN
TIGERS

TOP 25 PROJECTIONS Football Power Index: FPI predicts and ranks team strength based on expected points added from offense, defense and special teams, adjusted for opponent strength. Using preseason FPI, ESPN Stats & Information has projected each team's chances to win every game on its schedule as well as its chances to take home a conference crown. Vegas odds: Each team's odds to win the national championship are provided by Westgate Las Vegas SuperBook.

ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREAS PREIS

OHIO STATE

LAST SEASON 14-1 [8-0 BIG TEN EAST]

FPI PROJECTED
WINS

11.4

FPI PROJECTED CHANCE
TO WIN CONFERENCE

62.5%

VEGAS ODDS TO WIN
NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

5-2

➤ STRAP IN FOR THE REPEAT

The three-QB Tilt-a-Whirl let a rider off this July—Hello, H-back Braxton Miller! But Ohio State's key to defending its title was never the swirling debate under center. Nor was it keeping star DE Joey Bosa (suspended for the VaTech revenge game) from violating team rules. It's actually much simpler.

"A coach's best friend is a running back who can shoulder the load while you figure other things out," says coach Urban Meyer. "What Ezekiel Elliott did at the end of last season might be the best illustration of that I've ever seen."

Coachspeak? Not considering the 225-pound junior ran for 696 yards and eight TDs in OSU's final three games. "He's the best practice offensive player I've ever had," Meyer says. "A guy who works that hard during the week sets a tone on Saturdays."

And with four linemen back from the No. 3 rush offense in the Power 5 (264.5 ypg), Elliott will remain the Buckeyes' main attraction. Tilt-a-Whirl be damned. —RYAN MCGEE

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

Even the most diehard OSU fans weren't making travel plans for Arlington, Texas, after Miller went down and J.T. Barrett fell to unranked Virginia Tech. Of course, Cardale Jones ... and the rest is history. As for '15, folks in Columbus have every reason to start packing for Glendale, Arizona. The Buckeyes team with talent—seven of eight units rank in my top eight nationally (No. 1 at QB, 2 at RB, 2 at LB), and Bosa (13½ sacks) is easily my top defensive end. OSU should be favored by at least a touchdown in every game, with MSU being the slimmest at minus-7.

BRAD EDWARDS' PLAYOFF FORECAST

IN IF ... they do what every analyst, sharp and projection expects: go 12-0 and win a second straight Big Ten title.

The defending champs will have a slight edge with the committee—the intrigue of a repeat is human nature. But the Buckeyes won't need much help. They even got in with one "bad" loss in '14, so there just doesn't appear to be a preseason scenario in which they're out (lose three QBs?).

OUT IF ... OSU improbably loses to Sparty or slips up at the Big House and falls short in the East. And the 49th-toughest schedule, according to FPI, simply doesn't afford the team any leeway. It's Indy or bust.

FPI'S PLAYOFF PATH

Ohio State's chances to win each game.

09.07
@ Virginia Tech
74.0%

09.12
vs. Hawaii
99.2%

09.19
vs. Northern Illinois
97.3%

09.26
vs. Western Michigan
95.8%

10.03
@ Indiana
93.7%

10.10
vs. Maryland
97.4%

10.17
vs. Penn State
88.8%

10.24
@ Rutgers
94.1%

11.07
vs. Minnesota
94.5%

11.14
@ Illinois
91.3%

11.21
vs. Michigan State
73.4%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD Even this percentage seems small for the country's best big-game coach (15-5 vs. top 10)—and he has 14 starters back.

SHARON KATZ FPI can't argue. OSU is the only team with at least a 60 percent shot to win every tilt. FPI ranks its D ninth, eight ahead of vaunted Sparty.

11.28
@ Michigan
77.9%

RB Ezekiel Elliott ▶

2

From left:
WR Josh Doctson,
QB Trevone Boykin,
RB Aaron Green

TCU

LAST SEASON
12-1 (8-1 BIG 12)

FPI PROJECTED WINS

9.8

FPI PROJECTED CHANCE
TO WIN CONFERENCE

36.9%

VEGAS ODDS TO WIN
NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

5-1

> OUT TO MAKE THEIR POINTS

Trevone Boykin recalls the exact moment TCU's spread clicked. It was the QB's second scrimmage last August, entering coach Gary Patterson's 14th season, an era defined by defense—only Alabama and Ohio State have allowed fewer points per game the past decade. But Patterson knew that his offense had to make a leap, so he'd hired a pair of coordinators to get his QB-turned-WR-turned-QB up to speed. "Our defense is used to running things," Boykin says. "But we started scoring on one-play drives. They looked at me like, 'OK, this might work.'" Did. It. Ever. TCU's scoring soared from 25.1 ppg to 46.5, No. 2 in the FBS behind Baylor, the Frogs' lone defeat. Now the senior who'd once been demoted to WR is a Heisman front-runner. "Maybe," he says, "but it's more important that we get rid of that '1' in the loss column." —R.M.

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

Last preseason the Horned Frogs were my most improved team—and they delivered, going from 4-8 to 12-1, including a 42-3 win over Ole Miss in the Peach Bowl. With 10 offensive starters back, TCU figures to score at an even higher clip, and despite inexperience in the back seven (three underclassmen could start), the D should be in good hands with Patterson. The Frogs throttled Big 12 foes in '14 (23 ppg margin), and I don't have them as 'dogs in any game. But they face tough tests at K-State and Oklahoma State, and OU is a toss-up. I have them as a TD favorite over Baylor.

BRAD EDWARDS' PLAYOFF FORECAST

IN IF ... Boykin improves on his breakout season and a D with just five starters back finds its footing. TCU must also win the Big 12—head-to-head tiebreaker included—and dominate lesser foes (no more four-point wins over KU) to avoid being denied again. **OUT IF ...** they don't eliminate doubt. Without a conference title game, a late fail at OU or vs. Baylor could be disastrous. The Frogs will have to make their closing statement against the Bears the day after Thanksgiving because they don't play on the regular season's final weekend. And off the radar is not a good place to be.

FPI'S PLAYOFF PATH

TCU's chances
to win each game.

09.03	@ Minnesota	85.1%
09.12	vs. Stephen F. Austin	99.9%
09.19	vs. SMU	98.8%
09.26	@ Texas Tech	79.6%
10.03	vs. Texas	82.7%
10.10	@ Kansas State	75.2%
10.17	@ Iowa State	93.6%
10.29	vs. West Virginia	82.2%
11.07	@ Oklahoma State	71.4%
11.14	vs. Kansas	99.1%
11.21	@ Oklahoma	53.5%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD A 4-8 TCU lost by a FG here in '13; these Frogs (88 plays of 20-plus yards in '14) should blow OU out.

SHARON KATZ The next week vs. BU will be hyped, but FPI calls this a trap. While BU (No. 3) outranks OU (No. 15) in FPI, playing OU on the road is about a six-point swing for the Frogs.

11.27
vs. Baylor
57.3%

From left:
WR D'haquille
Williams,
QB Jeremy
Johnson

AUBURN

LAST SEASON 8-5 [4-4 SEC WEST]

FPI
PROJECTED
WINS

7.6

FPI PROJECTED
CHANCE
TO WIN
CONFERENCE

2.7%

VEGAS ODDS TO
WIN NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP

15-1

> HELLO, MY NAME IS ...

World, meet Jeremy Johnson. He's already making Auburn fans forget all about Nick Marshall. [What Prayer at Jordan-Hare?] Yes, the newest Tiger under center saw limited action in two years of backup duty, but he dazzled: 858 yards, nine touchdowns, 73.1 completion percentage. Auburn's offensive wizards are planning accordingly.

"We want to call eight plays vertically 25 to 30 yards down the field," O-coordinator Rhett Lashlee says. "If we hit half of them, that's four touchdowns or big, explosive plays. What you don't hit will have backed them up. Make them defend the whole field."

But WR Sammie Coates is gone, you say? Johnson still has toys aplenty in his chest to catch those 30-yard verticals, most notably D'haquille Williams, perhaps the country's top WR prospect for the 2016 draft (four 100-yard games last season). Yeah, you'll want to remember his name too. —R.M.

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

Offensive guru Gus Malzahn's sophomore slump saw his squad drop four of its last five tilts, including a back-and-forth OT Outback Bowl against Wisconsin. And while Malzahn loses 33 lettermen in 2015 (No. 115 in my experience rankings), life should be just fine on the Plains. Despite Johnson's limited experience (78 career pass attempts), Auburn still benefits from my third-highest QB unit in the SEC—and No. 18 overall—and an O-line stocked with NFL prospects (Alex Kozan, Avery Young). Even in the brutal SEC West, I peg the Tigers as underdogs in just three games: at LSU (+7), at Arkansas (+3) and at home to Alabama (+1½).

BRAD EDWARDS' PLAYOFF FORECAST

IN IF ... new D-coordinator Will Muschamp tightens a unit that ranked in the SEC's bottom five in points and rush and pass yards allowed per game. Even Coach Boom can't create world-beaters overnight, so hopes hinge on Johnson's becoming the megawatt QB pundits expect. The Tigers take on LSU, FPI's No. 5 D, in Week 3. No training wheels here.

OUT IF ... the offense's plethora of new faces don't learn to course-correct by pulling out the close games last year's group did not at the end of the season (two three-point losses in the final five). And with FPI's sixth-toughest schedule in '15, more close tilts are to be expected.

FPI'S PLAYOFF PATH

Auburn's chances to win each game.

09.05
vs. Louisville [Atlanta]
73.3%
09.12
vs. Jacksonville State
99.8%
09.19
@ LSU
29.1%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD AU gave LSU the worst loss of the Les Miles era in '14 (41-7). Now LSU's crop of so-so QBs faces blitz-happy Muschamp. A toss-up at best.
SHARON KATZ Don't let the Muschamp hype overshadow LSU's consistently elite defense: 4.6 ypp, No. 4 in the FBS since '11.

09.26
vs. Mississippi State
71.8%
10.03
vs. San Jose State
94.1%
10.15
@ Kentucky
69.8%
10.24
@ Arkansas
34.3%
10.31
vs. Ole Miss
48.3%
11.07
@ Texas A&M
32.8%
11.14
vs. Georgia
46.1%
11.21
vs. Idaho
99.1%
11.28
vs. Alabama
41.8%



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4

BAYLOR

LAST SEASON
11-2 (8-1 BIG 12)FPI
PROJECTED
WINS
10.0FPI
PROJECTED
CHANCE
TO WIN
CONFERENCE
37.4%VEGAS ODDS TO
WIN NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP
12-1

FPI'S PLAYOFF PATH

Baylor's chances
to win each game.09.04
@ SMU
96.6%09.12
vs. Lamar
99.9%09.26
vs. Rice
98.3%10.03
vs. Texas Tech
[Arlington] **84.8%**10.10
@ Kansas
97.7%10.17
vs. West Virginia
82.4%10.24
vs. Iowa State
97.2%11.05
@ Kansas State
75.5%11.14
vs. Oklahoma
68.5%11.21
@ Oklahoma State
71.7%11.27
@ TCU
42.7%HE SAID,
SHE CRUNCHED**BROCK HUARD** Three of the past four have been decided by three or fewer, but November will test the legs of BU's "basketball on grass" group. TCU should be a bigger favorite at home.**SHARON KATZ** FPI ranks BU's offense No. 1 and says this would be a toss-up on a neutral field.12.05
vs. Texas
83.0%

A SEASON TO FORGET

For all the success—a second straight Big 12 title, the nation's top scoring attack (48.2 ppg), the first Cotton Bowl berth since '80—Baylor isn't exactly nostalgic about last season: the meltdown in Morgantown; coach Art Briles glaring at Big 12 commish Bob Bowlsby as he named the Bears co-champs with TCU, a team they'd beaten; losing 42-41 to Michigan State in the Cotton Bowl.

"We have pretty long memories," growls 6-9, 280-pound DE Shawn Oakman. "We're reminded all the time that we were this close." One of 18 starters back, the senior, who led the D with 11 sacks, won't need to motivate much. And with junior Seth Russell (eight TDs, 1 INT in '14) stepping in for Bryce Petty, Briles should produce a sixth straight 3,500-yard QB. But if BU hopes to pull off the first Big 12 three-peat since Oklahoma ('06-08) and erase bad memories, it must improve against the pass (No. 107) in a pass-happy league. —R.M.

PHIL STEELE'S
SHARP EDGE

I expect a breakout year from Russell, who is surrounded by my No. 2 set of WRs in the nation, including junior Corey Coleman and sophomore KD Cannon (2,149 yards, 19 TDs combined in '14). BU also boasts my No. 1 O-line and No. 1 D-line in the Big 12. I expect the Bears to run roughshod over their first seven foes, but they will face much tougher opponents down the stretch: at K-State, OU, at OK State (a toss-up in my book), at TCU (+7 on a short week) and Texas. Still, with the most starters back in the Big 12, they will be neck and neck with TCU to get in the playoff.

BRAD EDWARDS'
PLAYOFF FORECAST

IN IF ... the D can make a stop. The Bears allowed more than 40 points four times in '14, which makes it tough to win the Big 12—and impress the committee. With the league's easiest slate, according to FPI, Baylor must dominate. **OUT IF ...** the Bears don't go 12-0. Now, their season doesn't necessarily hinge on TCU alone, especially hosting revenge-minded OU and with a trip to Oklahoma State. But the nonconference schedule is so weak, it feels like "win 'em all" has to be the mantra.

QB Seth
Russell

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◀ RB Derrick Henry

ALABAMA

LAST SEASON 12-2 (7-1 SEC WEST)

FPI PROJECTED
WINS
8.7

FPI PROJECTED
CHANCE TO WIN
CONFERENCE
12.9%

VEGAS ODDS TO
WIN NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP
5-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

No returning starter at QB, no problem. Nick Saban can win, and win big, with a newbie under center [see: two national titles with first-year starters, No. 1 playoff seed with Blake Sims last year]. Uncertainty at QB is no reason to count the current Tide out, especially with a Mack truck like RB Derrick Henry and a potentially dominant front seven [No. 1 DL and No. 3 LB units]. Alabama hasn't been an underdog in 68 straight games, and although that streak could end when it travels to Athens in Week 5, I still pick the Tide as a toss-up at Georgia and a 1½-point favorite at Auburn.

BRAD EDWARDS' PLAYOFF FORECAST

IN IF ... the Tide go at least 4-1 in games not in Tuscaloosa [vs. Wisconsin in Arlington, Texas, and at Georgia, Texas A&M, Mississippi State and Auburn]. With the country's toughest schedule, according to FPI, Bama is one of just a handful of teams that could reach the playoff without a conference title.

OUT IF ... the slew of new offensive faces can't find the end zone. Gone are the days of Saban defenses holding opponents to 10 points a game [especially with a troubled secondary: 43 pass plays of 20-plus yards allowed in 2014, No. 82 in the FBS], so Lane Kiffin's group must produce.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

Alabama's chances to win its toughest games.

10.03
@ Georgia
46.6%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD Bama's front stuffs downhill O's [hello, Nick Chubb], but special teams and especially coaching will be the difference. Advantage Tide, who should be 60-percent-plus faves. **SHARON KATZ** The *real* difference? UGa returns seven offensive starters, Bama four. That turnover drops the Tide's O out of FPI's top 15; UGa's ranks No. 5.

11.28
@ Auburn
58.2%

6 OREGON

LAST SEASON 13-2 (8-1 PAC-12 NORTH)

FPI PROJECTED
WINS
9.8

FPI PROJECTED
CHANCE TO WIN
CONFERENCE
35.6%

VEGAS ODDS TO
WIN NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP
25-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

Oregon has chugged along just fine in the post-Chip Kelly era, with Mark Helfrich blazing to 24-4 in two seasons in Eugene. Though 2015 will be his first year without Marcus Mariota, the Ducks are loaded at the skill spots: Senior Byron Marshall [1,003 receiving yards in '14] leads my top-ranked WR unit, Royce Freeman [12 games with 75-plus rush yards last year] heads the No. 4 group of running backs, and Eastern Washington transfer QB Vernon Adams was brilliant at the FCS level [10,438 pass yards in three years]. They'll need every ounce of that talent and speed in '15. While Oregon enjoys five Pac-12 games at home, it travels to revenge-minded Michigan State as well as Arizona State and Stanford, where I tag them as underdogs by 4, 3 and 7 points, respectively—a rarity for the Ducks, who have been favored in every game since 2011.

BRAD EDWARDS' PLAYOFF FORECAST

IN IF ... Adams carries Mariota's QBR legacy into '15. The Heisman winner's 90.9 QBR was the fourth-best mark in the past 10 years, and though Adams boasts just two career starts vs. Pac-12 teams [Oregon State in '13, UW in '14], he lit them up: a 97.2 QBR.

OUT IF ... the Ducks sink against Michigan State. Lose and they'd likely need to run the Pac-12 table, about a 5 percent proposition, according to FPI.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

Oregon's chances to win its toughest games.

09.12
@ Michigan State
48.7%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD UO loses beef on both lines—bad news against Sparty, which suffocates QBs [42 sacks in '14] and keeps its own clean [11 sacks allowed]. This tilt is closer to 75 percent for MSU. **SHARON KATZ** FPI can't ignore the Ducks' track record on O [No. 2 in the FBS since '11], so even in East Lansing and without Mariota, this one is close.

10.29
@ Arizona State
58.7%

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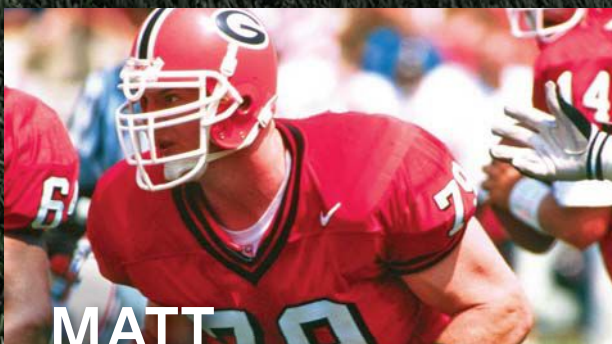
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Robert Griffin III photo courtesy of Baylor Athletics. Peyton Manning photo courtesy of Tennessee Athletics. Eli Manning photo courtesy of Mississippi Athletics. Colt McCoy photo courtesy of Texas Athletics. Matt Stinchcomb photo courtesy of University of Georgia Athletics.
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7

USC

LAST SEASON

9-4 (6-3 PAC-12 SOUTH)

FPI PROJECTED WINS

8.7

FPI PROJECTED CHANCE TO WIN CONFERENCE

17.5%

VEGAS ODDS TO WIN NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

15-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

USC fans, rejoice at last! The NCAA sanctions are over—and I predict the Trojans will make the playoff. While they won't be at 85 scholarship players, they'll have many more than the 50 who suited up for a 45-42 Holiday Bowl win over Nebraska. Along with improved depth, USC boasts elite talent in Heisman front-runner Cody Kessler (39 passing TDs in '14, No. 4 in the FBS) and the Pac-12's No. 1 O-line, D-line, LBs and DBs. I rate USC's schedule as the second toughest, behind only Alabama, but have the Trojans as 'dogs only at Oregon (+3).

BRAD EDWARDS' PLAYOFF FORECAST

IN IF ... Kessler matches one of the most underhyped TD-INT ratios I can recall (39-5) and wins at Notre Dame and Oregon—which might allow a one-loss USC to ride in without a Pac-12 title.

OUT IF ... the Trojans can't avoid injuries, especially on a D-line that loses DE Leonard Williams (80 tackles, seven sacks). Besides trips to ND and Oregon, Sept. 26 at ASU could be a trap after Stanford.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

USC's chances to win its toughest games.

10.17

@ Notre Dame

50.4%

11.21

@ Oregon

38.7%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD USC would prefer to play this one way earlier, but if near full strength, QB/OL/DL/LB all favor the men of Troy, who didn't lose a Heisman winner.

SHARON KATZ It's tough to outgun the Ducks in Eugene (40-3 since '09). Even at a neutral site, SC (No. 18 D) would have only a 46 percent shot vs. Oregon (No. 4 O).



◀ QB Cody Kessler

8 MICHIGAN STATE

LAST SEASON 11-2 (7-1 BIG TEN EAST)

FPI PROJECTED WINS

9.5

FPI PROJECTED CHANCE TO WIN CONFERENCE

15.7%

VEGAS ODDS TO WIN NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

20-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

Michigan State lost two games last season, and both of those teams—Oregon and Ohio State—went on to play in the national title game. This season? The Spartans figure to be even better. They're the Big Ten's most experienced squad (14 returning starters), and I rank their O- and D-lines No. 1 and No. 2 in the country, respectively. And it never hurts to have an NFL QB prospect like Connor Cook (8.8 ypa, No. 9 in the FBS) leading my No. 2 offense in the conference. I have Michigan State as an underdog in just one contest this year (at Ohio State, +7), but beware, Buckeyes: The visitor has won four in a row in this series.

BRAD EDWARDS' PLAYOFF FORECAST

IN IF ... downfield weapons step up for Cook. The pocket passer could be one of the nation's best (24 TDs, 8 INTs last season), but he's only as dangerous as his receivers. The Spartans' two best 2014 deep threats are gone, and the team's most veteran target, senior Aaron Burbridge, is coming off a spring foot injury. But if someone emerges, MSU can run the table.

OUT IF ... MSU falls to Ohio State. A victory over Oregon? Very impressive. Wins over Michigan and Nebraska? Not too shabby. But unless the Spartans leave Columbus with a W, they'll be watching the playoff from home.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

MSU's chances to win its toughest games.

09.12

vs. Oregon

51.3%

11.21

@ Ohio State

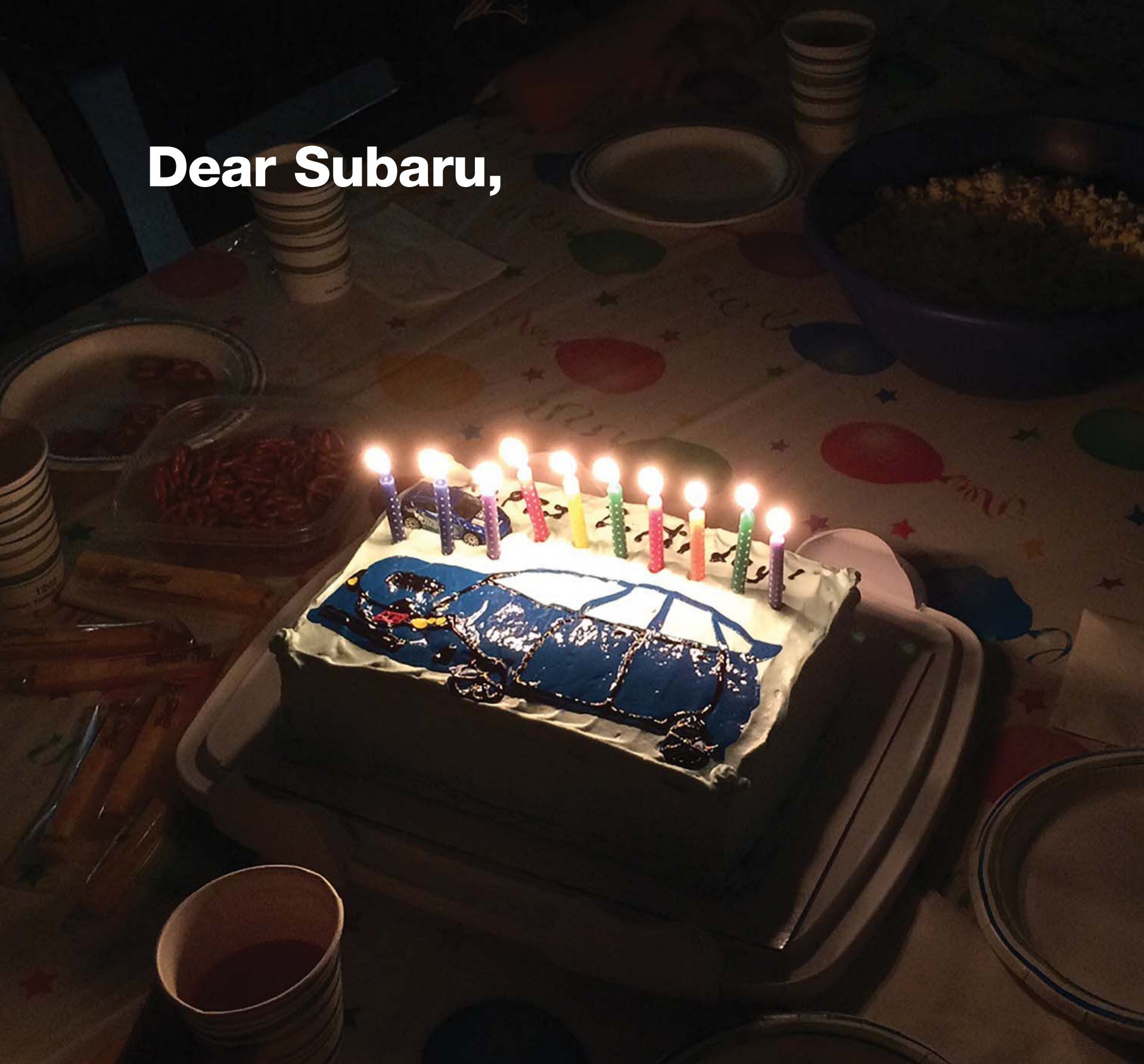
26.6%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD OSU is bigger, faster and more experienced, so I give Sparty just a 1-in-10 shot to pull this off. Cook (81.2 QBR in '14, No. 7 in the FBS) will need to be elite.

SHARON KATZ Cook can't help MSU's defense (8.5 ypp allowed against OSU in '14). FPI projects trouble for the unit again this season.

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9

FLORIDA STATE

LAST SEASON 11-1 (8-0 ACC ATLANTIC)

FPI PROJECTED
WINS
9.0FPI PROJECTED CHANCE
TO WIN CONFERENCE
19.5%VEGAS ODDS TO WIN
NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP
30-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

While the Noles appear to be down a notch, coach Jimbo Fisher can point to 2013 as a blueprint for surprise. Two years ago, FSU returned just 11 starters (same as '15) and had to replace 11 NFL draft picks (same as '15), including first-round QB EJ Manuel (see: Jameis Winston). But the '13 Noles dominated en route to an undefeated BCS title season—and I favor this group in every game save for a pick 'em at Clemson. Replacing Winston won't be easy, but Fisher landed Notre Dame grad transfer QB Everett Golson, who led the Irish to the '12 BCS title game, and FSU has reeled in my Nos. 4 and 3 recruiting classes the past two years. I actually project true freshman FS Derwin James to be a high-profile starter for my No. 9 secondary, a unit led by corner Jalen Ramsey, who's FSU's top returner in sacks.

BRAD EDWARDS' PLAYOFF FORECAST

IN IF ... the QB (Golson, Sean Maguire or J.J. Cosentino) plays solid vs. a mediocre schedule (FPI No. 58) and well enough to win at Clemson. It's that simple: Playoff dreams live on or die hard in Death Valley.

OUT IF ... the new faces on the O-line (four) and three key replacements on the defensive front don't step up in a hurry. Oh, and three of those seven cogs are redshirt frosh.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

FSU's chances to win its toughest games.

10.24
@ Georgia Tech
44.5%

11.07
@ Clemson
39.0%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD FSU does lose 11 starters, but Clemson is down eight on D alone. And while Dabo Swinney isn't a shabby recruiter, Fisher is a step ahead. Advantage: slightly to the Noles.

SHARON KATZ Even with a ton of turnover on D, FPI believes Clemson is the No. 4 unit in the FBS, while the Noles' O, which lost seven starters to the NFL, ranks No. 31. Advantage: Death Valley.

10
GEORGIA

LAST SEASON 10-3 (6-2 SEC EAST)

FPI PROJECTED
WINS
9.4FPI PROJECTED
CHANCE TO WIN
CONFERENCE
25.5%VEGAS ODDS TO
WIN NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP
30-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

Coach Mark Richt, despite playing in a bowl in each of his 14 seasons in Athens, is often labeled an underachiever. That notion is hard to dispel considering that the Bulldogs have suffered seven upsets the past two seasons. In '15, UGa draws Alabama (a pick 'em) and Auburn [+3] from the West and faces an improved Tennessee team on the road (pick 'em). Still, even with inexperienced soph Brice Ramsey at QB, Richt has by far the most talent in the East, with my No. 1 RBs, No. 3 O-line and No. 9 LBs in the country. Although the Dawgs will struggle to reach a plus-16 turnover margin again, their yards-per-game differential in SEC play (82.3) suggests they were much better than a three-loss team.

BRAD EDWARDS' PLAYOFF FORECAST

IN IF ... a dynamic QB emerges. Of course, with RB Nick Chubb back after rushing for 1,547 yards as a true frosh, Richt can call conservatively and still win the East—that just won't cut it vs. the West's best.

OUT IF ... UGa doesn't beat Bama or Auburn—or loses a likely rematch against either in Atlanta. With the SEC's fifth-easiest slate, according to FPI, the Dawgs likely won't be forgiven for more than one loss.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

UGa's chances to win its toughest games.

10.03
vs. Alabama
53.4%

10.10
@ Tennessee
49.0%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD The Dawgs and Vols will limp in coming off Bama and Arkansas, respectively. But UGa has more NFL-caliber talent (Chubb, LB Leonard Floyd, DE Jordan Jenkins) to outlast a UT team that's a year away.

SHARON KATZ FPI sees that the Vols return an SEC-high 18 starters and have signed back-to-back top-five classes, which will pay dividends.

CB Jalen
Ramsey ▶



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11

UCLA

LAST SEASON 10-3 [6-3 PAC-12 SOUTH]

FPI
PROJECTED
WINS

9.4

FPI PROJECTED
CHANCE TO WIN
CONFERENCE

20.0%

VEGAS ODDS TO
WIN NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP

30-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

Good news for the folks in Westwood: Jim Mora has methodically built UCLA into a perennial contender—and this could be his best squad yet. The Bruins lead the Pac-12 with 18 returning starters in '15, six of whom earn nods on my all-conference first team, most in the league. UCLA also rates top-four in eight of my nine Pac-12 unit rankings, including the No. 2 set of RBs (Paul Perkins, 6.3 ypc) and receivers (Jordan Payton, seven TDs). The lone exception is at QB. Three-year starter Brett Hundley is off to the NFL, and true frosh Josh Rosen looks poised to win the starting job. At least the newbie will have time to work out the kinks: I project the Bruins as 'dogs at Stanford [+6] and at USC [also +6], but those road trips aren't until Week 7 and 13, respectively.

BRAD EDWARDS' PLAYOFF FORECAST

IN IF ... play in the trenches improves. The O-line paved the way for Perkins (121.2 ypg, tops in the Pac-12 last year) but left its quarterback out to dry (41 sacks allowed, fourth most in the Power 5).
OUT IF ... UCLA can't protect its house. The Bruins won 10 games last year, but all three L's came in the Rose Bowl. That won't cut it with their tougher '15 road slate [at Arizona, Stanford, Utah and USC].

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

UCLA's chances to win its toughest games.

10.15
@ Stanford
49.1%

11.28
@ USC
42.6%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD USC will wish it drew UCLA earlier in '15—well before OC Noel Mazzone gets a season's worth of work with his new QB. This feels closer to a toss-up, and as winners of three straight (by 16.3 ppg), UCLA gets the psychological leg up.

SHARON KATZ UCLA and USC are evenly matched rivals, with nearly identical FPI ratings. But seasoned QB Cody Kessler and a "road" game for UCLA give the Trojans the edge.

▲
RB Paul Perkins



12 NOTRE DAME

LAST SEASON 8-5

FPI
PROJECTED
WINS

8.5

FPI PROJECTED
CHANCE TO WIN
CONFERENCE

N/A

VEGAS ODDS TO
WIN NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP

20-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

Notre Dame's schedule isn't easy—it never is—but the Irish return loads of experience: 17 starters and several key pieces back from yearlong absences, notably CB KeiVarae Russell (suspension) and LB Jarrett Grace (broken fibula). But this year, I tag ND as a 'dog only at Clemson [+3] and at Stanford [+6]. Why the optimism? For one, I projected Malik Zaire QB1 on the heels of his impressive '14 bowl, so Everett Golson's departure is far from crippling. For another, with five top-15 units (RB, WR, DL, LB, DB), this squad is even stronger than the one that played for the 2012 national title.

BRAD EDWARDS' PLAYOFF FORECAST

IN IF ... Zaire develops as a passer. Opponents will expect him to take off running (six 10-plus-yard carries in five games last year), so minus the element of surprise, Zaire must polish his consistency and downfield accuracy.

OUT IF ... the defense trips up early, so beware of Georgia Tech. Navy's triple-option gave the Irish fits in '14 (season-high 336 rush yards allowed), and the Yellow Jackets could do more damage. No team can bank on a playoff spot with two losses, so falling to Georgia Tech in Week 3 would leave no room for error ... with Clemson, USC and Stanford still on the docket.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

Notre Dame's chances to win its toughest games.

10.03
@ Clemson
45.2%

11.28
@ Stanford
40.8%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD The last three ND-Stanford tilts were won by a TD or less. Zaire's legs (96 rush yards against LSU in last year's bowl game) might be the trump card in a tight game.

SHARON KATZ Stanford has two aces of its own: FPI's sixth-best special teams and the game site [Palo Alto].

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13

CLEMSON

LAST SEASON

10-3 [6-2 ACC ATLANTIC]

FPI
PROJECTED
WINS

8.9

FPI PROJECTED
CHANCE TO WIN
CONFERENCE

26.2%

VEGAS ODDS TO
WIN NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP

20-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

Clemson is a trendy pick for the ACC title this year—QB Deshaun Watson [14 passing TDs, five rushing TDs in eight games] returns, along with the squad's top four rushers and top three receivers. But it was the nation's top defense that led the Tigers to their fourth straight 10-win season last year, and that group loses six of its eight leading tacklers. In all, Clemson is down 29 lettermen, and its schedule does it no favors: The Tigers face Miami and Georgia Tech out of the Coastal to go along with challenging nonconference games against Notre Dame and South Carolina. A home matchup with Florida State in November might determine the ACC champ.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

Clemson's chances to win its toughest games.

10.03
vs. **Notre Dame**
54.8%

10.24
@ **Miami (Florida)**
53.1%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD Clemson will surely give up more yards and points in '15, but Watson can take advantage of a Miami defense that lost not just five starters but its *best* five starters. Honestly, the Tigers' potent offense should make them heavier favorites.

SHARON KATZ In addition to Miami's home-field advantage [worth 3.07 ppg], FPI expects the Canes to be a top-five offense in the ACC with Brad Kaaya [66.5 QBR as a freshman]. That will challenge a Clemson D with holes to fill and just three returning starters.

14

LSU

LAST SEASON

8-5 [4-4 SEC WEST]

FPI
PROJECTED
WINS

9.1

FPI PROJECTED
CHANCE TO WIN
CONFERENCE

14.4%

VEGAS ODDS TO
WIN NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP

30-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

Though the Les Miles era has featured an annual exodus of underclassmen to the NFL, this year the Tigers lost just three players early to the draft. As a result, the 2015 Tigers come back loaded, and they should receive much-improved QB play from both Brandon Harris, now a sophomore with a year under his belt, and junior Anthony Jennings, who started 12 of 13 games last year. They'll get plenty of help from Heisman-contending RB Leonard Fournette [1,034 yards and 10 TDs] and WRs Travin Dural and Malachi Dupre. With another incredibly fast defense—my pick for third best in the country—LSU could very well find itself in the playoff this season.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

LSU's chances to win its toughest games.

11.07
@ **Alabama**
40.7%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD In the past two seasons, LSU's defense has allowed two of its worst rushing tallies in 14 years, and Bama will present the stiffest challenge in 2015. Nick Saban has had Miles' number the past three seasons and should make this five in a row.

SHARON KATZ After ranking eighth in the SEC in efficiency last year, LSU's offense is expected to improve in 2015. But scoring on Alabama's D, which FPI says will be the second-best unit in the nation, will be one tall order—especially in Tuscaloosa.

11.21
@ **Ole Miss**
47.2%

15

OLE MISS

LAST SEASON

9-4 [5-3 SEC WEST]

FPI
PROJECTED
WINS

8.7

FPI PROJECTED
CHANCE TO WIN
CONFERENCE

10.2%

VEGAS ODDS TO
WIN NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP

40-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

Under Hugh Freeze, Ole Miss has upgraded its talent level significantly, and last year's impressive start was a testament to that. This year the Rebels return 16 starters on a team loaded with potential first-round NFL prospects, including star WR Laquon Treadwell [632 yards in nine games before he broke his leg], LT Laremy Tunsil, DL Robert Nkemdiche and nickelback Tony Conner. They have three units that rank in my top 10 in the nation—receiver, defensive line and linebacker—and have the good fortune of avoiding the top three squads out of the East. Not only do the Rebels have a chance for their first double-digit win total in 12 years, they have a shot to make it to Atlanta.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

Ole Miss' chances to win its toughest games.

09.19
@ **Alabama**
36.0%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD A couple of first-year QB starters have won in Tuscaloosa under Nick Saban's reign, but their names were Cam Newton and Johnny Manziel—it'll be tough for juco transfer Chad Kelly, the likely starter. In this one, a 1-in-3 shot feels a whole lot more like 1 in 10.

SHARON KATZ You can't ask for a better matchup than Ole Miss and Alabama, FPI's top two projected defenses in the nation. Alabama has the edge on offense, though, where it has ranked higher than Ole Miss in efficiency for 10 straight years.

10.31
@ **Auburn**
51.7%

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16

STANFORD

LAST SEASON

8-5 [5-4 PAC-12 NORTH]

FPI
PROJECTED
WINS

8.6

FPI PROJECTED
CHANCE TO WIN
CONFERENCE

16.0%

VEGAS ODDS TO
WIN NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP

30-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

Under Jim Harbaugh and now David Shaw, Stanford has soared to new heights, with a clear identity built on running and defense. This year's defense, though full of new starters, has plenty of natural skill, and the offense returns a veteran QB in Kevin Hogan. Last year Shaw told me that he had probably his most talented offensive line yet, despite its inexperience, and it'll only be better with another year under its belt—I rank the O-line eighth best in the country. Stanford also benefits from just four conference road games, three of them against the weakest teams in the league, and a home date with Oregon on Nov. 14 that might very well decide who wins the Pac-12 North.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

Stanford's chances to win its toughest games.

09.19

@ USC

36.0%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD This rivalry features two of the more accomplished quarterbacks in college football, but USC's athleticism, balance and overall playmaking in all three phases of the game will provide a distinct advantage for Cody Kessler and the Trojans.

SHARON KATZ Stanford faces six FPI top-50 opponents, but this is the only one on the road. Stopping the Trojans' talented offense—whose speed will prove especially troublesome—will be a challenge for a defense that ranked sixth last year but lost seven starters.

11.14
vs. Oregon
47.4%

17

ARIZONA STATE

LAST SEASON

10-3 [6-3 PAC-12 SOUTH]

FPI
PROJECTED
WINS

7.7

FPI PROJECTED
CHANCE TO WIN
CONFERENCE

6.2%

VEGAS ODDS TO
WIN NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP

100-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

Todd Graham has done a tremendous job in his three years at Arizona State, notching back-to-back seasons of double-digit wins and keeping last year's green Sun Devils in playoff contention into November. This team is far more experienced, with 16 starters back, and it should be well-stocked on offense thanks to QB Mike Bercovici [61.8 completion rate last year] and several explosive skill players, including speedy WRs D.J. Foster [12 combined receiving and rushing TDs] and Gump Hayes, a redshirt junior in his first year with ASU. The Pac-12 South schedule will be daunting, particularly back-to-back games with USC and UCLA, but if Graham has proved anything, it's that he's up for a challenge.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

Arizona State's chances to win its toughest games.

09.05

vs. Texas A&M [Houston]

34.6%

10.03

@ UCLA

30.2%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD Bercovici, one of the best pure passers in the game, threw for nearly 500 yards in a 62-37 loss to UCLA a season ago, but he still couldn't prevent ASU's worst home loss of the Graham era. Speed, size, experience and the bitter memory of last year make this closer to a coin toss.

SHARON KATZ FPI expects the UCLA offense that dominated ASU last year to rank even higher in 2015—eighth in the FBS. Add in UCLA's home-field advantage [worth 3.07 ppg] and the Sun Devils' D is in for a challenge.

18

ARIZONA

LAST SEASON

10-4 [7-2 PAC-12 SOUTH]

FPI
PROJECTED
WINS

7.7

FPI PROJECTED
CHANCE TO WIN
CONFERENCE

2.4%

VEGAS ODDS TO
WIN NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP

200-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

Last year, thanks to a road win at Oregon and a victory over in-state rival ASU for the Pac-12 South crown, the Wildcats unexpectedly found themselves in the playoff discussion in November. But despite their success, the peripherals were a tad suspect—most notably the fact that they were outgained in conference play during the regular season [minus-4.4 ypg]. This year I have the Cats as underdogs in five games—the most of anyone in the Top 25—as the South is so good this year, and this team has five tough Pac-12 road games. Arizona features my fourth-best linebacker unit but overall returns just six senior starters, so although the Cats should earn a bowl berth, a decline from last year should be expected.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOT

Arizona's chances to win its toughest games.

10.03

@ Stanford

29.3%

11.07

@ USC

23.9%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD Arizona is 1-4 against USC since 2010, but those losses have come by just 19 points combined. If the Cats' run game [2.7 ypc in last year's 28-26 loss] improves enough so that QB Anu Solomon won't need to throw it 72 times, this game will be close again.

SHARON KATZ Even at the Coliseum, FPI's love for USC might seem high against the South champs. But Arizona has trailed the Trojans in defensive efficiency in four straight years, and its total efficiency was just seventh in the Pac-12 last season.

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19

WISCONSIN

LAST SEASON

11-3 [7-1 BIG TEN WEST]

FPI
PROJECTED
WINS

8.5

FPI PROJECTED
CHANCE TO WIN
CONFERENCE

8.7%

VEGAS ODDS TO
WIN NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP

100-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

After a third Big Ten title game in four years, Wisconsin lost its head coach when Gary Andersen surprisingly departed for Oregon State. But Madison native and UW alumnus Paul Chryst should be able to follow the template set by his predecessors of winning with strong line play and a dominant running game. Without Melvin Gordon, rushing numbers might slip a bit, but Corey Clement averaged 6.5 ypa last season and is a competent replacement. The Badgers must travel to Nebraska and Minnesota, but they have the good fortune of facing Rutgers and Maryland, two teams they beat by a combined score of 89-7 last year, out of the East. The Badgers are Big Ten contenders yet again.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

Wisconsin's chances to win its toughest games.

09.05
vs. Alabama [Arlington, Texas]
17.5%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD In all honesty, Wisconsin's chances should be closer to 5 percent. Not even Alabama's QB inexperience, up against a Wisconsin defense that was fourth in the country in ypg last season, evens this matchup. Bama's front seven is too good.

SHARON KATZ Can a Gordon-less offense—with fewer than 50 career OL starts—score on an Alabama D that returns seven starters and is ranked second in the country? No team has allowed fewer points per drive than Alabama over the past four years.

10.10
@ Nebraska
44.2%

20

GEORGIA TECH

LAST SEASON

11-3 [6-2 ACC COASTAL]

FPI
PROJECTED
WINS

7.5

FPI PROJECTED
CHANCE TO WIN
CONFERENCE

12.5%

VEGAS ODDS TO
WIN NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP

200-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

Despite a lackluster start last year, Georgia Tech ripped off an incredible close to the season, ending a five-year losing streak to in-state rival Georgia and putting a massive scare into FSU in the ACC championship en route to a top-10 finish. Led by QB Justin Thomas, Tech's option offense was cruelly efficient down the stretch. Thomas is one of 13 returning starters (though he's the only player on the roster with more than 50 rush attempts last year), and the team boasts solid talent along both lines. The schedule will pose a challenge—the Yellow Jackets draw FSU and Clemson out of the Atlantic and travel to Notre Dame—but GT should contend for the wide-open ACC Coastal once again.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

Georgia Tech's chances to win its toughest games.

09.19
@ Notre Dame
34.2%

11.28
vs. Georgia
36.6%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD The option demands tremendous confidence, trust and timing, and coach Paul Johnson's new starters will climb a steep learning curve this year. In a rivalry game (especially this one), anything is possible, but this game feels out of reach for the Jackets.

SHARON KATZ FPI doesn't question Georgia Tech's offense, which converted third downs at a historic rate last season (58 percent). But it does have doubts about whether the team's D, a unit that finished outside the top 100 in points per drive allowed last season, can keep up.

21

OKLAHOMA

LAST SEASON

8-5 [5-4 BIG 12]

FPI
PROJECTED
WINS

8.6

FPI PROJECTED
CHANCE TO WIN
CONFERENCE

16.1%

VEGAS ODDS TO
WIN NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP

30-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

Oklahoma tends to play its best football when expectations are low, which is where the Sooners find themselves this year—rare under Bob Stoops. Stoops brought in highly regarded O-coordinator Lincoln Riley (a former QB and assistant at Texas Tech) to run the air raid offense. He has the perfect triggerman in Texas Tech transfer Baker Mayfield (12 TDs in eight games in 2013), who will have RB Samaje Perine—last year's Big 12 offensive freshman of the year—and an array of skill-position weapons at his disposal. Oklahoma could jump out to a 9-0 start, but its Big 12 title hopes will be decided by late road games against Oklahoma State and Baylor and a home matchup with TCU.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

Oklahoma's chances to win its toughest games.

09.12
@ Tennessee
41.1%

11.14
@ Baylor
31.5%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD The Sooners have had trouble with Baylor in recent years, and that won't change in November, when the Bears could be undefeated and No. 2 in the polls. This feels like Baylor should be even more than a 68 percent favorite, as remarkable as that sounds.

SHARON KATZ No wonder FPI doesn't trust the OU defense: It allowed a TD on nearly half of Baylor's drives in the Bears' 48-14 win last season. Although the results might not be that ugly again, Oklahoma will have trouble slowing Baylor, FPI's top-rated offense.



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22

ARKANSAS

LAST SEASON

7-6 [2-6 SEC WEST]

FPI PROJECTED WINS

8.1

FPI PROJECTED CHANCE
TO WIN CONFERENCE

5.6%

VEGAS ODDS TO WIN
NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

40-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

Arkansas appears well-positioned to build on last year's late-season success with a dominant offensive line that returns four starters along with two 1,100-yard rushers and veteran signal-caller Brandon Allen, who should be in for a fine senior season after throwing for 20 TDs last year. The Hogs face the gauntlet of the SEC West as well as Tennessee and Missouri out of the East, but this is clearly Bret Bielema's most talented team in Fayetteville.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

Arkansas' chances
to win its toughest games.

10.10
@ Alabama
35.0%

11.14
@ LSU
36.6%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD Arkansas' lack of playmakers and top-end speed outside will be noticeable in LSU's hostile home stadium.

SHARON KATZ FPI expects the Tigers' offense to be one of the most improved units in the nation and too much for the Razorbacks' D to handle.

23

BOISE STATE

LAST SEASON

12-2 [7-1 MWC MOUNTAIN]

FPI PROJECTED WINS

10.8

FPI PROJECTED CHANCE
TO WIN CONFERENCE

69.1%

VEGAS ODDS TO WIN
NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

200-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

Boise State has long been the gold standard for non-Power 5 teams. The Broncos return 17 starters and have my top-rated Mountain West units on offense and defense, led by a core of skill-position talent such as RB Kelsey Young (331 yards at Stanford last year). One concern is new starting QB Ryan Finley, a redshirt sophomore who might struggle at BYU in Week 2. But Boise is once again the favorite to grab the Group of 5 spot in a major bowl game.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

Boise State's chances
to win its toughest games.

09.12
@ BYU
56.8%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD The thin air, raucous crowd and high expectations in Provo make me believe the Cougars should be favored in this one.

SHARON KATZ Boise has FPI's second-best odds to go unbeaten, but it can't overlook BYU and talented QB Taysom Hill.

10.16
@ Utah State
66.6%

24

TENNESSEE

LAST SEASON

7-6 [3-5 SEC EAST]

FPI PROJECTED WINS

8.6

FPI PROJECTED CHANCE
TO WIN CONFERENCE

13.4%

VEGAS ODDS TO WIN
NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

50-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

With an SEC-best 18 starters back and oodles—yes, oodles—of talent on both sides of the ball, Tennessee appears poised to reclaim its status as an SEC powerhouse. QB Joshua Dobbs [17 total TDs last year] will benefit from UT's top 10 receivers returning. But in this conference, nothing comes easy: The Vols play at Alabama, Florida [10 straight losses to the Gators] and Missouri, and they have tough home dates with Georgia and Oklahoma.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

Tennessee's chances
to win its toughest games.

10.10
vs. Georgia
51.0%

10.24
@ Alabama
31.9%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD This game won't be close if Dobbs is as beat up as Tennessee's QBs sometimes are by October after a tough SEC run.

SHARON KATZ The Vols are on the rise [13th in preseason FPI], but FPI needs more to believe they can beat the best team of the past four years.

25

TEXAS A&M

LAST SEASON

8-5 [3-5 SEC WEST]

FPI PROJECTED WINS

8.6

FPI PROJECTED CHANCE
TO WIN CONFERENCE

10.2%

VEGAS ODDS TO WIN
NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

100-1

PHIL STEELE'S SHARP EDGE

After the Aggies reached No. 6 in the nation at 5-0 last year, the wheels fell off their bandwagon. A&M finished 8-5—no cause for shame but a disappointment after that start. This year A&M returns 16 starters, led by QB Kyle Allen [16 pass TDs last year] and perhaps the SEC's best WR group, including Josh Reynolds [842 yards]. Decorated D-coordinator John Chavis comes aboard from LSU to lead a unit replete with raw talent; there is cause for optimism in College Station.

FPI'S LONGEST SHOTS

Texas A&M's chances
to win its toughest games.

10.24
@ Ole Miss
42.9%

11.28
@ LSU
38.2%

HE SAID, SHE CRUNCHED

BROCK HUARD Kevin Sumlin is 0-3 in this matchup, and unfortunately for him, his team is tangling with an even better LSU squad this year.

SHARON KATZ If the Aggies' D can pull closer to the level of their offense, ranked first in the SEC, this game becomes far less of a long shot.

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J.J. WATT - DEFENSIVE END

BEST WORST SEASON EVER

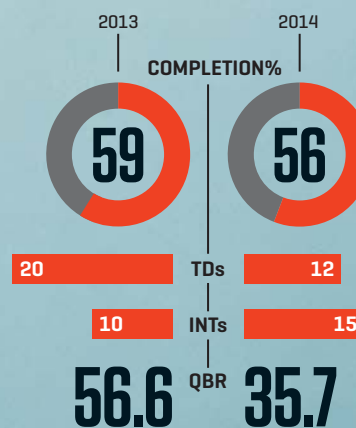
How is the Big Ten's lowest-rated QB so high on NFL draft boards? Penn State's Christian Hackenberg is a pro-style pocket passer with the kind of potential scouts love. But if he doesn't perform this year, the love might not last.

BY KEVIN VAN VALKENBURG

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW CUTRARO

LION TAMED

Hackenberg fell in every major statistical category from '13 to '14—and was sacked 44 times, second most among Power 5 QBs. His 12 TDs was the fewest of any QB with at least 400 attempts.



COLLEGE FOOTBALL PREVIEW 2015



WINNING FOR LOSING

Despite the statistical slide, the junior was still Todd McShay's No. 1 pick in his initial 2016 mock draft. As for Mel Kiper's Big Board, only Cal's Jared Goff was higher. Hackenberg is vying to be the first PSU QB taken in Round 1 since Kerry Collins ('95).

1

TODD McSHAY'S
TOP OVERALL
PICK IN HIS
FIRST 2016
MOCK DRAFT

2

MEL KIPER'S
SECOND-BEST
QB ON HIS
INITIAL 2016
BIG BOARD



It's not a stretch to say Penn State's season hinges on which Hackenberg shows up.

Christian Hackenberg is going to be late for dinner. He has been out in the sweltering July heat for three hours, hustling through drills, frustrating defenses with his Winchester of an arm and offering patient instruction to the nation's top high school quarterbacks. Just three summers ago, he was one of them, here at Nike's Elite 11 camp held each summer in Beaverton, Oregon.

A whistle blew six minutes ago, signaling it was finally time to break for food. Now a small army of blue-chip preps, college counselors and a handful of retired NFL players are milling in the direction of the cafeteria, weary from a long but productive day. But the 6-foot-4, 228-pound Hackenberg hangs back, stationed in the far end zone, his gray shirt soaked with sweat, obsessing over footwork and the nuances of ball protection.

He takes a snap, backpedals on the balls of his feet and digs his cleats into the turf as he sets up in an imaginary pocket. He ducks his shoulder and shields the ball from an imaginary pass rusher, stands tall again, then zips an outlet pass toward a friendly camper serving as a stand-in safety valve. Hackenberg jogs back to the line and goes through the routine again. Two times. Four times. Ten times. It might be the least sexy drill a quarterback could dream up, but Hackenberg spends a solid 15 minutes

perfecting it, starting and stopping several times, clapping his hands in frustration when he doesn't nail his dropback—one stride too many, his feet not quite the right distance apart.

You don't have to watch more than a few hours of practice to understand why the Penn State junior, who hasn't missed a start since arriving in Happy Valley and is arguably the top QB for next year's draft, might be the most polarizing talent in college football. In an era in which gaudy passing stats have become the norm, when a 4,000-yard season barely moves the needle (we've seen 69 of them since 2000),

Hackenberg's poor production in 2014 is very difficult to explain away.

On the one hand, stats, in the eyes of most scouts, have become so inflated that they're now almost meaningless. There are too many moving parts on a football field, too many outcomes dependent on others, to make judgments based on one player's numbers. Instead, NFL front office types look at tape of Hackenberg and see, potentially, the next Andrew Luck. Maybe even the next Tom Brady. Give him enough protection to set up in the pocket and he has the acuity to quickly assess defenses, to look off safeties and corners with a glance. Give him receivers who create separation and he has the arm to uncork NFL-level spirals into windows so tight that most college quarterbacks wouldn't even consider the risk. Not to mention he is built like a lumberjack, possesses an analytical mind captivated by nuance and shows the determination to do the mundane film work necessary to maximize his abilities.

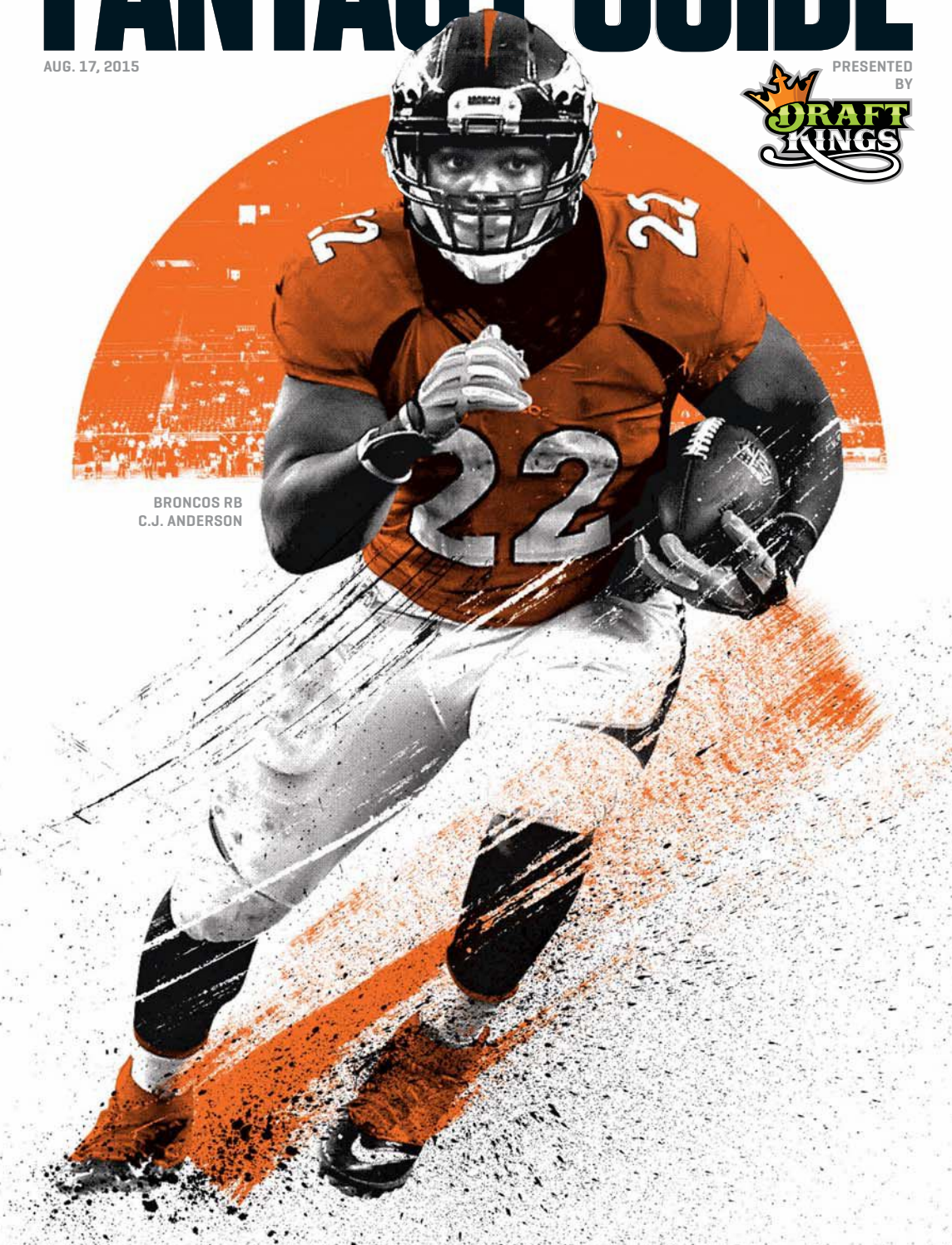
ESPN

ULTIMATE DAILY FANTASY GUIDE

AUG. 17, 2015



BRONCOS RB
C.J. ANDERSON





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1 Don't let all your season-long draft research go to waste.

You've identified the sleepers who are going to make an impact this season already—pick them early in the year before everyone else catches on.

2 Target the weak defenses.

For example, if you identify a horrendous pass defense (i.e. the 2014 Atlanta Falcons), select a quarterback and a wide receiver from the same team who can pick that defense apart.

3 Find the hidden values.

Oftentimes you can find a bargain on DraftKings by staying up-to-date on injury news and suspensions. Draft that player at a low price on DraftKings and fill the rest of your roster with top-tier talent.

4 Pick a running back and a defense from the same team.

A strong running back should be able to control the clock and keep the defense off the field. If a defense isn't on the field then it can't be scored on!

5 Don't be afraid to take risky players.

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Nº 01

So it was an easy decision to pay for **Dez Bryant**, who delivered a top-five week Targeting weak D's early in the season is tricky, though, as personnel and schemes change from year to year. But using a combination of last year's results [see charts] and this season's early rankings is a good place to start for Week 1 of daily fantasy sports [DFS].

PFF DEFENSE RANK VS. POSITION	FANTASY PPG ALLOWED RANK VS. POSITION	AVERAGE RANK
QUARTERBACK ▾	RUNNING BACK ▾	WIDE RECEIVER ▾
1. WAS 32 32 32	1. TEN 29 31 30	1. WAS 32 31 31.5
2. NO 31 29 30	2. NO 25 29 27	2. NO 31 27 29
3. TB 28 22 25	3. TB 30 22 26	3. ATL 29 26 27.5
		TIGHT END ▾
		1. WAS 32 29 30.5
		2. CHI 28 32 30
		3. ARI 25 28 26.5

COVER ILLUSTRATION: MILES DONOVAN
FROM I FEET: STEVEN RISING/USA TODAY SPORTS; KEVIN TERPPEL / AP IMAGES; COVER: PIC TADIA/AP IMAGES

Nº 02

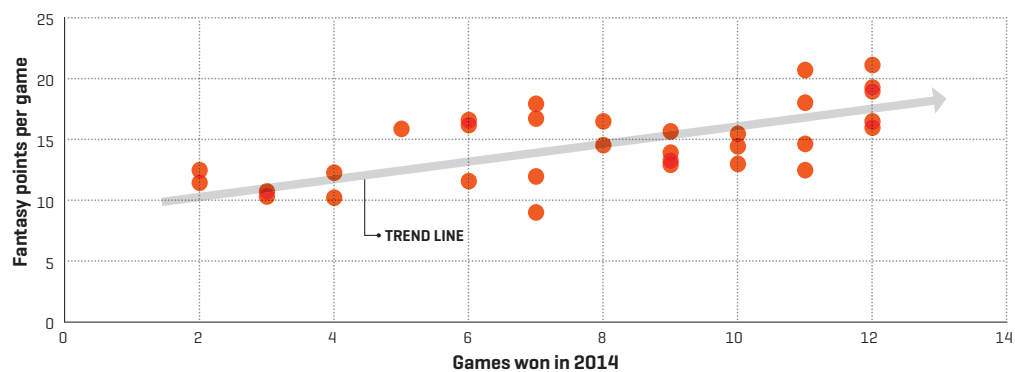


DON'T GO CHEAP ON QBs

It's the most important position on your DFS roster, so don't look to fill your QB slot with a minimum-salary player. A good place to start is by eliminating all signal-callers on bad teams. As the chart below shows, QB fantasy points correlate well with team wins—a trend that does not hold up for any other position. As in season-long fantasy, quarterbacks who rack up rushing yards and TDs are great upside plays, especially if they're priced slightly under the elites.

Russell Wilson was the best example of this in 2014: He ranked as fantasy's No. 1 QB three times last season, tied with Aaron Rodgers for the most in the NFL, while being a cheaper week-to-week option throughout the season.

HOW TEAM WINS CORRELATED WITH QB FANTASY PERFORMANCE, 2014



CARRIES ARE KING FOR RBs

It's easy to be seduced by high-efficiency running backs—those with very high points per opportunity [PPO] rates who could skyrocket up the fantasy ranks if given the ball more. And while little-used backs make for good stashes in season-long leagues, you want guaranteed carries when playing DFS. The reason? In 2014, only two of the top 20 fantasy running backs finished outside the top 20 in carries. More proof of why you can't ignore volume when choosing a running back in DFS: In Weeks 12 to 17, **C.J. Anderson** accumulated 140 carries, second only to DeMarco Murray, and as a result, he had the most consistent game-to-game fantasy output of any RB in the league down the stretch [see chart].

No
03

C.J. ANDERSON'S 2014
FANTASY OUTPUT, WEEKS 12-17

WEEK 12
3RD [RB rank]

24

WEEK 13
3RD

23

WEEK 14
4TH

23

WEEK 15
12TH

9

WEEK 16
5TH

19

WEEK 17
1ST

28

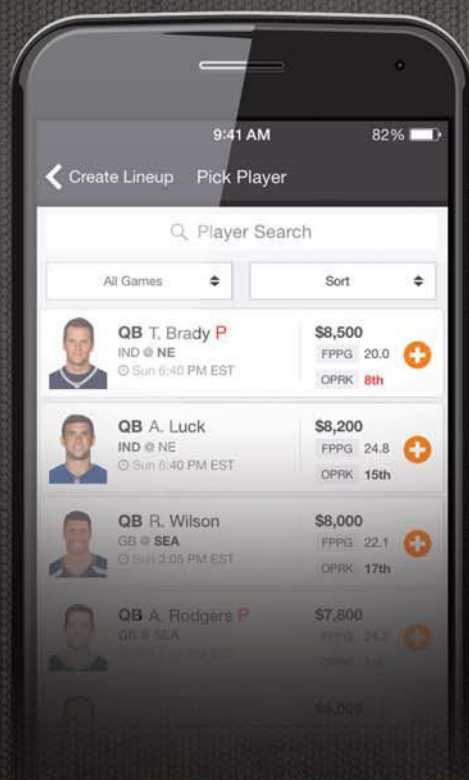




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No
04

SCRUBS DON'T BECOME STUDS OVERNIGHT

Far too often in DFS, a star RB misses time with an injury and his lower-priced backup becomes a popular value play. But that strategy rarely exceeds expectations. For example, when Arian Foster missed three contests last season, Alfred Blue, the Texans' fill-in, averaged 7.5 fantasy points per game less than Foster. The notable exception is Knile Davis, who has scored an impressive 18.5 ppg in the two games Jamaal Charles has missed since 2013. But on average, even with a boost from Davis, backups replacing a top-15 starter have scored 32 percent fewer fantasy ppg than the starter (in terms of fantasy points per game at season's end) since 2013. The lesson: Look elsewhere for your sleeper RB.

DROP-OFF IN FANTASY PPG FROM STUD TO BACKUP RB, 2013-14

STUD FPPG	12.9
BACKUP FPPG	8.8
DROP-OFF	32%



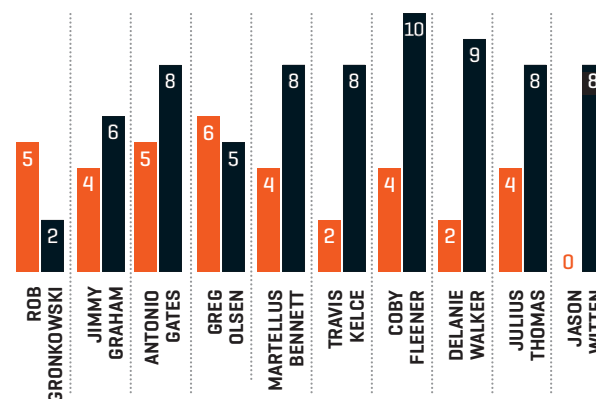
PAY UP FOR GRONK

There's no position in fantasy with fewer good options than TE, and when talent is scarce, a known commodity becomes all the more valuable. That's why Rob Gronkowski—who scored 38 more points than the No. 2 TE (Jimmy Graham) last season in PPR—is worth his high sticker price. Gronk was a top-three fantasy TE in five of his 15 games in 2014, second most among fellow top-10 TEs, and perhaps more impressive, he rarely posted a dud performance (see chart). With the TE position again promising little depth, Gronk is as safe as they come.

No.
05

TOP 10 TIGHT ENDS, PPR SCORING, 2014

■ WEEKS INSIDE TE TOP 3 ■ WEEKS OUTSIDE TE TOP 10





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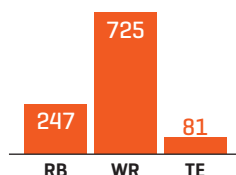
NO.

06

WIDE RECEIVERS MAKE THE BEST LOTTERY TICKETS ...

During weeks in which there's scarcity across positions—thanks to a small slate or bad matchups—it makes sense to spend the least amount of money on WR, which has more variability week to week than any other position. Consider: WRs have accumulated 725 plays of 40 yards or more since 2012, more than twice as many as RBs and TEs combined [see chart]. And when there are more big plays to go around, it stands to reason that minimum-salaried WRs have a greater chance of making them than their RB/TE counterparts. So give your squad a high floor with conservative QB/RB picks and high upside with some cheap receivers who have big-play potential.

40-YARD PLAYS, 2012-14



NO. 07

... AND EFFICIENCY STATS ARE A GREAT WAY TO FIND THEM

When trying to locate the cheap WRs likely to pop early in the season, use PFF's efficiency stats as your guide. Jarvis Landry and Kenny Stills, two Dolphins due for an uptick in targets, stand out as obvious DFS sleepers thanks to their elite catch rates (80 percent for Landry, third overall; 79 percent for Stills, fourth). And the Steelers' **Martavis Bryant**, who scored a league-leading 0.51 fantasy points per opportunity as a rookie, figures to be a good value play if he gets more looks. He scored a touchdown every 6.1 targets in 2014, the best rate among players with at least 45 targets in a given season since 2010. Jordy Nelson's 2011 performance [a TD every 6.2 looks] was the next-best figure, and all he's done since then is average 11.5 fantasy points per game, 10th most among WRs.



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Weekly Fantasy Football for Cash

Week 1

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"I think he is easily a top-five pick," an NFL scout says.

On the other hand, in this era of constant comparison of next-level metrics, stats still matter—especially if they are as bad as Hackenberg's last fall.

To his many critics, including a small but vocal contingent of Penn State die-hards, his projection as a top-five pick is one of the more baffling proclamations about a player in recent memory. Hackenberg's completion percentage (55.8 percent, 88th in the country in 2014) is used to question his accuracy, his touchdown-to-interception ratio (12-15) as proof that he forces throws into coverage. In 13 games, he was sacked 44 times, and while no one pins that solely on him, it points to heavy cleats and renders him a relic among the fleet-footed passers permeating the college game. Jeff Risdon, an analyst for RealGM.com, tweeted after PSU's loss at Michigan that Hackenberg was "undraftable" and the "worst quarterback I saw all year." The website Pro Football Focus graded him as one of the least accurate QBs in the country, even when he wasn't facing pressure (No. 74 out of 86 qualifying FBS QBs).

"Christian spent most of his time solving problems, running from problems, taking a lot of criticism, which I'm really, really defensive about," says second-year Penn State coach James Franklin, referring to Hackenberg's struggles on a team that returned just four other offensive starters last year. "To be honest with you, I'm a little angry. I don't know if it was fair, just or realistic."

So who is right, and who is going to be the fool, when Hackenberg is a first-round bust or a midround boom? He actually has two years of eligibility left, so it's possible this debate will rage into the 2017 draft, but for now, he embodies a

conundrum that has haunted NFL GMs since the beginning of modern scouting: Should a player be judged more by his physical potential or by his production? Because while stats alone are no way to build a draft board, prototypical big-arm busts like Kyle Boller and Jake Locker continue to ace the NFL eye test despite warning-sign numbers.

This game of scouting roulette speaks volumes about the disconnect between college and pro offenses. After years of trying to adapt playbooks to the thrilling potential of the dual-threat QBs coming off the collegiate production line—only to watch the likes of Colin Kaepernick, Robert Griffin III and Johnny Manziel struggle—NFL brass are once again turning to tried-and-true pocket passers. "The one system that's never failed at the highest level is the pro-style offense," says Hackenberg, who signed with Penn State largely because he wanted to play in the pro-style system of now-Texans head coach Bill O'Brien. "You need a guy who can sit back there in the pocket, see the field and deliver the ball to the best athletes, let them make plays."

Mississippi State's Dak Prescott and TCU's Trevone Boykin will likely be two of the most exciting college football players this year, and their field-reversing highlights should have them vying for the Heisman Trophy—the same way Manziel won it three years ago and RG3 before him and Cam Newton before him. And yet Prescott and Boykin are nowhere to be found on the top half of preseason draft boards.

Instead, you'll find Hackenberg, Ohio State's Cardale Jones, Michigan State's Connor Cook and Cal's Jared Goff, whose primary instincts are to stand tall in the pocket and drive the ball downfield with their arms. That's how a Super Bowl is won. That's how a QB stays off the injury

report. Of the 10 passers with the highest QBR in the NFL last season, Russell Wilson's 118 rush attempts was 75 more than any other quarterback on the list.

"Why is the pocket passer still the most important commodity in football?" asks Jordan Palmer, a counselor at Elite 11 and a current NFL free agent QB. "Because this game is about completions. And completions don't always come when you take five steps and throw with no one around you. Completions come with people in your face, people hanging on you. Brees and Brady, they create space in the pocket. They buy themselves time even though they're not athletic, and they know exactly when to get the ball out. Christian has those same qualities."

But more than instincts, how much weight should we place on a player's intangibles? How much credit should he receive for his character and composure? That's yet another issue about which Hackenberg represents a divide.

Considered the top prep senior arm in the 2013 class, he stuck by his commitment to Penn State even after the school was hit by the NCAA with heavy scholarship reductions and a postseason ban due to the Jerry Sandusky child sex abuse scandal. Thirteen players on the roster transferred, and half a dozen recruits backed out of their commitments. But Hackenberg kept his word to O'Brien, thinking he would never be allowed to play in a bowl, much less for a national title, and fully aware that the program could offer only 15 scholarships per year, 10 fewer than the schools it competed against. "It was huge for our confidence," says senior center Angelo Mangiro. "It was proof that even through all this turmoil, we could still get great players."

The decision, Hackenberg says, did not come easily. He had 50 other scholarship offers and debated them for

DOWN IN THE VALLEY

QBs DON'T ALWAYS DESERVE THE LION'S SHARE OF CREDIT OR BLAME, ESPECIALLY ON A TEAM DOWN 20 SCHOLARSHIP PLAYERS DUE TO SANCTIONS.



With four new linemen, Hackenberg had a 10.4 percent Big Ten sack rate. Of first-round QBs since '04, only Tim Tebow had a higher league rate (11.0, SEC) the year before being drafted.



After pro-style guru Bill O'Brien left for the Texans in '14, Hackenberg suffered a sophomore slump (7.5 ypa to 6.2 ypa) in James Franklin's system, which is less five-step-friendly.



Then-sophomore Akeel Lynch and the Lions' rushing attack averaged just 101.9 ypg, No. 120 in the FBS and PSU's fewest since '04 by 28 yards.



Of the four WRs who caught a pass, then-soph Geno Lewis was the lone nonfresh. The group had just eight TDs for an O that scored 20.6 ppg, worst in the Big Ten and No. 113 in the FBS.

UNDER PRESSURE

Hackenberg threw 77 passes while being hurried or knocked down. Over the past four seasons, no first-round QB [see right] threw more in his final college campaign.

77

2014 JAMEIS WINSTON	FLORIDA STATE	74
2013 TEDDY BRIDGEWATER	LOUISVILLE	71
2011 RYAN TANNEHILL	TEXAS A&M	59
2013 JOHNNY MANZIEL	TEXAS A&M	50
2011 ROBERT GRIFFIN III	BAYLOR	48
2014 MARCUS MARIOTA	OREGON	45
2011 ANDREW LUCK	STANFORD	43
2011 BRANDON WEEDEN	OKLAHOMA STATE	34
2012 EJ MANUEL	FLORIDA STATE	33

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COLLEGE FOOTBALL PREVIEW 2015

hours with people he trusted. He knew, on some level, that he was putting his own football future at risk. There was no guarantee O'Brien would remain in Happy Valley for the duration of his career. He knew he'd be signing up to lead a team that would receive scrutiny and ridicule, a team that wouldn't always have the talent to prop him up or protect him. He bought in anyway.

Hackenberg's first season scarcely could have gone better. He won the starting job in August camp and threw for 278 yards and two touchdowns in his first start, a win over Syracuse. Despite some predictable growing pains, he was a perfect fit for O'Brien's system—the same one Tom Brady ran while O'Brien was with the Patriots—which put Hackenberg primarily under center, taking five- and seven-step drops, making multistep progressions and throwing vertical routes. A conservative game manager for the first few starts, in time he was given freedom to stretch the field, and the comparisons with Luck began to spread. He led a program on the brink to seven wins, none bigger than a 31-24 upset of No. 15 Wisconsin in the finale, a game in which he threw for 339 yards and four scores. "I've been around some pretty competitive people in my life," Mangiro says, "but he tops that list."

But the hard hits would only get harder. O'Brien left in January after Hackenberg's freshman season. Penn State lost four offensive linemen (three would go on to the NFL), and tight end Adam Breneman, the second-best PSU recruit behind Hackenberg, would miss all of 2014 with a knee injury. The hardest shot of them all for Hackenberg, though, was adjusting to new coach James Franklin's approach, which emphasized shotgun sets and timing routes. Rather than build on his impressive freshman season, Hackenberg appeared hesitant in the pocket, often scrambling to allow his young, inexperienced targets more time to get open. Three of his four receivers—including his best one, DaeSean Hamilton—were freshmen, and routes were often free-lanced, their combinations a mess.

Eventually, injuries decimated a shallow offensive line, and Hackenberg rarely had more than three seconds to throw. In one eight-game stretch, he tossed three touchdowns to 10 interceptions. It got so ugly, with rumors swirling that Hackenberg might transfer, that one Pennsylvania radio station even debated whether Franklin should bench him.

The season reached a nadir on Nov. 1 with a miserable 20-19 home loss to Maryland in which Hackenberg was spotted in a heated sideline exchange with offensive coordinator John Donovan. The local media portrayed Hackenberg as sullen, petulant and mopey. Donovan would later say that it was simply Hackenberg's competitive spirit boiling over, a kid not used to being on a team this bad reaching his breaking point. But there it was, a crack in his intangibles facade, and scouts will undoubtedly be watching closely this season to see if further adversity causes it to widen.

Franklin, for one, doesn't seem concerned. A few days after the loss, the coach and Hackenberg met to clear the air and address frustrations. "It's important to keep in mind the unique situation he was in," Franklin says. "He was a true sophomore, 19 years old, but he's looking around and he's the most experienced guy in the huddle. Now you add in a lack of a running game and a lack of protection—that's a lot to carry on your shoulders."

Hackenberg, to his credit, isn't defensive about the boos and cries for his benching. Some of the vitriol wounded his pride, but he understands that he must be more Joe Flacco, less Philip Rivers with his sideline theatrics. "I have to be even keel," Hackenberg says. "If I throw a touchdown, I have to act the same as if I throw an interception. I can have a little five-second spurt where I'm pissed off, but I have to feel like I'm a rock who won't be moved one way or another."

A week after his stint as a counselor at Nike's Elite 11 camp, Hackenberg spent four days at the Manning Passing Academy in Thibodaux, Louisiana, picking the brains of Peyton and Eli. Watching the elder Manning fuss over

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the minutiae of footwork was like getting a graduate degree in the science of pocket passing.

"Every one of his drops, even if he's not in a game situation, looks the exact same," Hackenberg says. "He's always out there coaching himself, obsessing over the details. If a receiver breaks off a route a yard short, he's pointing it out before the ball even leaves his hand. It's awesome to watch."

With all the consternation over Hackenberg's struggles, it's easy to forget that Penn State's season ended on the program's highest note in half a decade. In September, the NCAA lifted the scholarship and postseason restrictions, meaning the 6-6 Lions were eligible for a bowl. So it was that on the evening of Dec. 27 in Yankee Stadium, Hackenberg shredded Boston College for 371 yards and four scores in a dramatic 31-30 overtime win, Penn State's first postseason victory since 2009.

For the first time in months, he looked like the nation's best pocket passer—taking the snap, backpedaling on the balls of his feet and digging his cleats into the turf before delivering throws with pinpoint accuracy. The linemen who had once struggled to block for him formed a cohesive unit, allowing just two sacks on 50 pass attempts. And his top three receivers totaled 21 catches, 273 yards and three scores with nary a drop. When the game was over, as Penn State players stormed the field, Franklin was so emotional, he called Hackenberg over, gently wrapped his hands around the quarterback's head and cried.

Now Hackenberg is expected to carry that momentum from the Bronx into his junior season. With each repetition, every five-step drop, tuck of the shoulder and release of the ball, he knows that he has far more important matters than being on time for dinner.

This season—with four linemen returning as well as his top four wideouts and his leading rusher—Hackenberg knows that anything but a return to form will result in criticism landing squarely, and rightly, on his shoulders. No more excuses. What kind of quarterback are you? **E**

SPORTSNATION

WHICH QUARTERBACK SHOULD GO FIRST IN THE NFL DRAFT?

35% Cardale Jones Ohio State	24% Christian Hackenberg Penn State	21% Connor Cook Michigan State	12% Cody Kessler USC	8% Jared Goff Cal
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AUBURN'S JEREMY JOHNSON COLLEGE FOOTBALL'S BREAKOUT QB

So you've heard that Penn State quarterback Christian Hackenberg has scaled a draft board or two. Well, another pocket passer, 900 miles south of Happy Valley, is also about to make a name for himself. Introducing Auburn QB Jeremy Johnson.

He's a 6-foot-5, 240-pound junior with just 78 career pass attempts to his name, but his 9-2 TD-to-INT ratio has helped earn him a 97.3 QBR. Brace yourselves, Auburn fans, you might just have another Cam Newton-level, out-of-nowhere star on your hands. Says ESPN Insider KC Joyner: "Gus Malzahn's system turned Newton—a transfer who didn't even win the starting job at Florida—into a Heisman Trophy winner. It can turn Johnson into one too."

And that's more than idle chatter. Here is what Joyner saw after breaking down the Auburn game film.
—GREG ROSENSTEIN



HIS ACCURACY IS ELITE

... which is a must in Malzahn's spread, favoring quick timing passes to receivers running down the middle of the field.

KC SAYS "That need for speed often makes QBs forget their mechanics. But he was repeatedly asked to make this type of throw against Arkansas in '14, and he was crisp every time."

75.7

COMPLETION
PERCENTAGE IN '14

HIS LINE WILL BUY HIM TIME

... and have fresh legs. Devonte Danzey started seven games at left guard in '14 but could be a backup in '15—a testament to the depth on the Plains.

KC SAYS "Auburn was a top-10 Power 5 team in preventing sacks last year, and that was while working around injuries. If the line stays healthy, it could provide Johnson the protection needed to contend for a title."

544

SNAPS RECORDED BY
DANZEY IN '14

HE WON'T MISS SAMMIE COATES

... thanks to D'haquille Williams. A senior WR, Williams is a potential first-rounder in '16 per Mel Kiper and clicks with Johnson: The duo went 8-for-8 for 153 yards and a TD.

KC SAYS "When I looked at [Williams'] juco tape, it was like looking at Cordarrelle Patterson. ... He had that type of explosiveness."

19.1

YPC ON JOHNSON-TO-
WILLIAMS CONNECTIONS IN '14



Hey sports fans! Looking for an answer? Ask me your burning sports questions using #PULSEOFTHENATION on SportsNation's Instagram handle. Your question could appear in an upcoming issue of ESPN The Magazine with my answer. See you then!

—MICHELLE BEADLE



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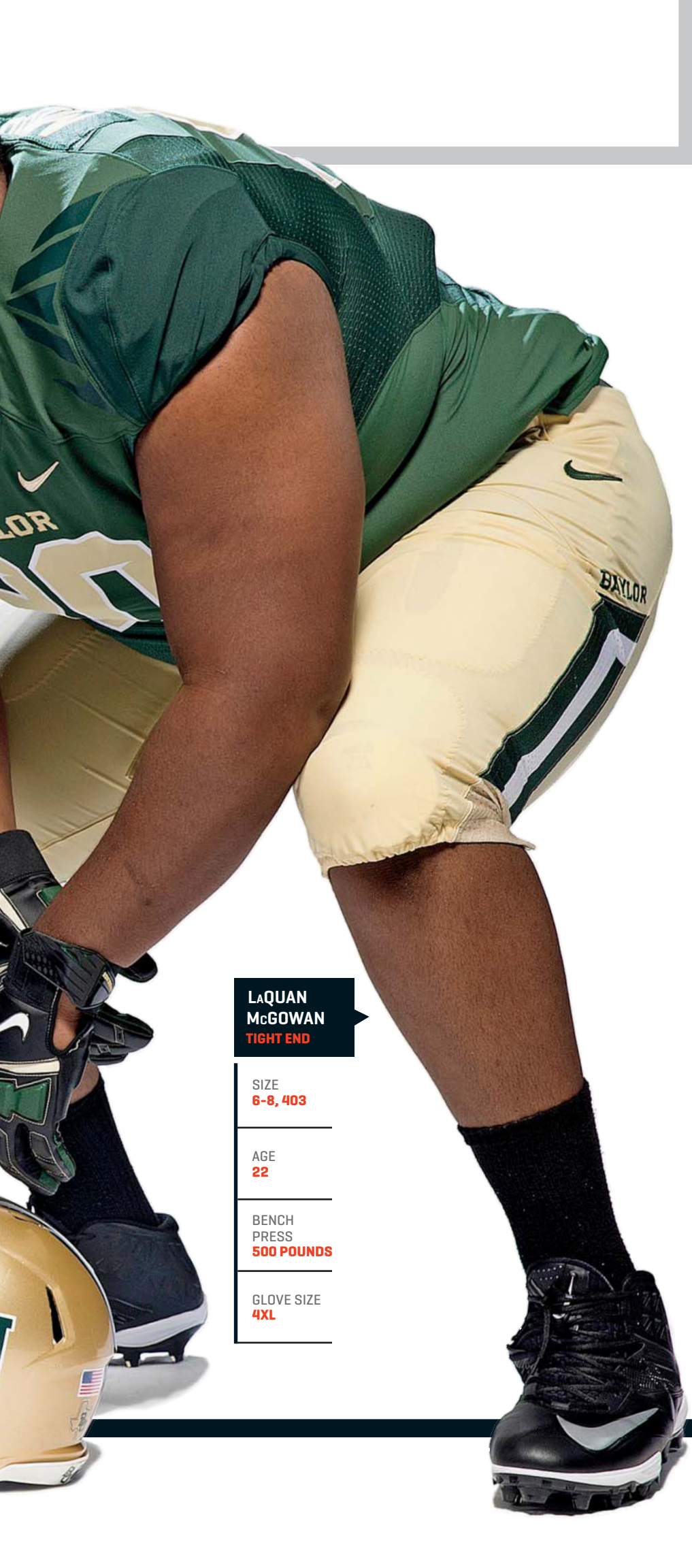
**SHAWN
OAKMAN**
DEFENSIVE END

SIZE
6-9, 280

AGE
23

VERTICAL
LEAP
36 INCHES

40 TIME
4.8 SECONDS



**LaQUAN
McGOWAN**
TIGHT END

SIZE
6-8, 403

AGE
22

BENCH
PRESS
500 POUNDS

GLOVE SIZE
4XL

BIG FOR THEIR AGE

Shawn Oakman and LaQuan McGowan, Baylor's biggest big men, are 13 feet and 680 pounds of football glory. We spent two days with the Bears' behemoths for a glimpse of how they're living (really) large.

BY MAX OLSON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEN SKLAR



LAQUAN MCGOWAN HAS a lot on his plate after officially switching from offensive guard this offseason. He also has big shoes to fill. Literally. The titanic tight end wears size 21 ... every day but Saturday. Come game day, he squeezes into size 18s—they pinch his toes, but he insists they help him run faster—as his right-sized shoes feel too heavy on the field. It's not the only concession he's made for his heft: This spring team trainers had McGowan focus on cardio and agility drills, keeping him out of the weight room to avoid adding even more bulk. "People go, 'Oh my god, he's 400 pounds!'" McGowan says. "I don't want to be 400 pounds. I'm working towards *not* being 400 pounds." Meanwhile, Oakman, who arrived three years ago as a 250-pound transfer from Penn State, has built himself into a potential No. 1 overall pick with 6 a.m. sessions that include hurling medicine balls with his linemates and racing wide receivers in sprint drills.

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OAKMAN IS FAR from inconspicuous—both on the field, when he’s harassing quarterbacks [to the tune of 11 sacks last year], and off it, when he walks his three bulldogs around Waco [often shirtless and with his pet python on his shoulders]. “I can be me and be free,” he says. McGowan finds his solace at local fishing holes. Here, at an unfamiliar spot on the Brazos River outside McLane Stadium, he’s surprised at the prospects. “It’s the first time I’ve ever seen fish rolling around in this water.” At first, Oakman is excited to shove off in the borrowed bass boat, but he reconsiders as his teammate comes aboard. “You’re three people by yourself!” Still, the duo are most comfortable within the walls of McLane, where Oakman and McGowan are looking to make a big statement by pushing Baylor over the top and into the playoff, and to do it in style. The NCAA banned Oakman’s signature crop-top jersey, so he plans to bring back his green mohawk to counter. McGowan? He’s primed to build off his thunderous Cotton Bowl showing, when he caught his now-famous 18-yard TD. “I believe I’ve got more in me,” says the man coach Art Briles calls “2035”—as in player of the future. Just don’t call the pair Baylor’s big uglies. Says Briles: “I don’t know if there’s two better-looking guys in America.”



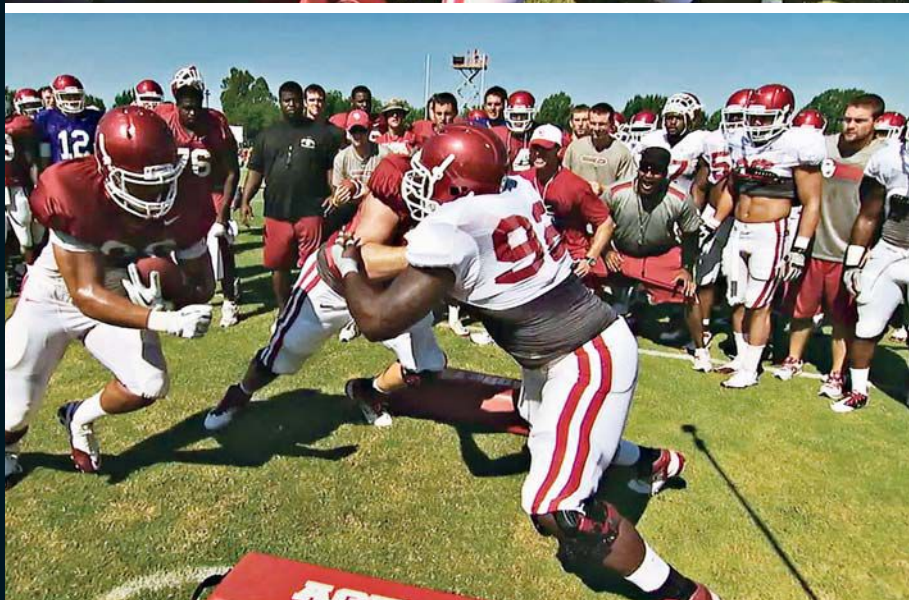
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THIS IS NOT JUST A



DRILL

The Oklahoma drill is a rite of passage, a revered test of will—and everything we’ve come to fear about football.

BY DAVID FLEMING



The official start of the Sooners’ football season isn’t Game 1; it’s the first day of practice in pads, when teammates line up for the decades-old hitting tradition invented by former coach Bud Wilkinson in 1947.



L

LIKE EVERY OTHER football player on the night before practice starts, Blake Bell is far too anxious to sleep. It's a humid summer night almost exactly a year ago, and Bell is kept awake by the impending thunderclap of pads. After three seasons at quarterback for Oklahoma, including eight starts in 2013, the 6-foot-6, 259-pound Wichita native has converted to tight end for his final season. For years, he was protected from any contact in practice, but no longer. Bell remembers the night well: lying in bed, unable to escape the thought that in a few hours his future would be determined by a rare event—a senior making his first attempt at the Oklahoma drill, a simple yet savage hitting exercise that signals the dawning of each new football season.

The root of Bell's night terrors is the telltale sign of the Oklahoma: tackling dummies laid down lengthwise on the field to create a narrow alleyway no more than two yards wide. When called out by coaches, three players—a defender, a blocker and a ball carrier—must override the alarms of danger and doubt screaming inside their heads and step into the gauntlet, framed by a frenetic mosh pit of teammates. The task is simple: hit faster, hit harder, conquer. The ball carrier crouches in the backfield as his blocker squats and puts his fist in the dirt. Across from him, the defender does the same. A split second of calm passes as the crowns of their helmets nearly touch. The whistle wails. The players explode into each other like runaway trains. Helmets crack. Joints grind. Feral groans and whimpers escape involuntarily. The back looks for a sliver of space, then tries to pile-drive his way to daylight. When one side has asserted its will, usually in just a few seconds, it's over. As Bill Belichick says, the power of the Oklahoma is the way it quickly answers the most essential questions in football: "Who is a man? Who's tough? Who's going to hit somebody?"

"There's only one way through: straight forward or straight back," Bell says. "That makes it a moment of truth, a do-or-die thing, for every player."

Especially here in Norman, where the Oklahoma drill was invented some seven decades ago. Since then, it has spread and grown to become an annual rite of passage for players. It's one part time-honored tradition, one part skill-building exercise, one part utterly insane, head-on car crash. And there's nothing like it anywhere else in sports, which might be a good thing. In the post-concussion era, the Oklahoma encapsulates the psychological push and pull of the game—a secretly thrilling and at times sickening three-second snapshot of everything we love and now fear about football.

With practice looming the next morning, Bell sits up in bed and grabs his phone. He knows exactly whom to call. In the late 1970s, his father, Mark Bell, was a fast, snarling, contact-craving tight end and defensive end at Colorado State and for five seasons in the NFL with the Seahawks and Colts. Coaches at Colorado State used the Oklahoma as a kind of human cockfight, pitting Mark against

The Sylvia Circle Demons, a youth team in Rock Hill, S.C., perform dozens of Oklahoma drills each August.

his hard-charging twin brother, Mike, a defensive end, to pump everyone up for the true beginning of the season, the first day of hitting in practice. The brothers didn't mind. They loved that the drill was less about technique or talent and more about measuring the willingness to fight.

Thirty years after Mark last stepped into the fire, he knew immediately what the call from his son was about. No two words evoke more pain and pride in former players than *Oklahoma* and *drill*. Even before saying hello, Mark, with a twinge of nostalgia in his voice, summed up the drill the best way he knew how.

"Time to get your mean on, son."

AT 8:30 THE next morning, Barry Switzer, dressed in golf shorts and a light blue T-shirt, steps out of his home on the edge of OU's campus and strolls down the shady side of Chautauqua Avenue toward the football practice fields. Spry and feisty at 77, the Hall of Fame coach, one of only three men to win a national championship and a Super Bowl, never misses the first day of contact. By the time he arrives, the scorching prairie sun has already cooked the wet, thick grass into something that feels like a microwaved sponge. Switzer, though, snarls at the first person who offers him a bit of relief. "No shade," he says out of the corner of his mouth. "Oklahoma drill day. Suck it up."

The tradition dates back to 1947, when Bud Wilkinson took over the Sooners. Before coaching, Wilkinson had served in the Navy's V-5 preflight program, which trained and evaluated cadets for aviation and used boxing and wrestling as tools to weed out pilots who lacked the competitiveness and aggression for warfare. With World War II over and the GI Bill still in effect, Oklahoma's campus—and football tryouts—was flooded with former soldiers. Wilkinson realized he too needed a way to assess the "fighting will" of hundreds

of potential players.

Wilkinson also wanted something that would train players for his new defense. Most teams at the time were using the wide-tackle six, a heavy, human-barricade-style front. But Wilkinson had developed a way to add speed, athleticism and creativity by positioning his outside linebackers on the line as defensive ends. This was the 5-2 Okie front, known today as the 3-4 defense. To make it work, Wilkinson needed three interior down linemen who could do the work of four (or more) by exploding off the snap, reading the ball carrier and then, in tight quarters, shedding blocks to make tackles. In other words, he needed players who would excel at the Oklahoma drill.

"We just called it the 'one-on-one,' and, oh, I couldn't begin to count the number of times Bud made us run that drill," says Jack Santee, a member of the Sooners' first national championship team in 1950. "It was a competitive, spirited thing, and it's at the very foundation of what we built at Oklahoma."

Wilkinson constructed a dynasty that won three national titles and, between 1953 and 1957, an unprecedented 47 straight games. All along, curious coaches from around the country descended on Norman to steal the Sooners' secrets. And thus the Oklahoma drill became one of the best examples of copycatting in football. By the time Wilkinson retired in 1963, the drill had spread as far as Green Bay, where Vince Lombardi considered it an essential measure of manhood.

While playing in Arkansas, Switzer ran it from both sides—as a center and a linebacker for the Razorbacks—and he employed it generously in his 16-year coaching tenure in Norman, leading the Sooners to three more national titles. "The Oklahoma is one of the few Neanderthal drills that I still believe in," Switzer says. "You learn all you need to

know about a player, and you learn it in a hurry."

That was the case with current Oklahoma coach Bob Stoops, who in 1979 was a scrawny true freshman defensive back at Iowa. On his first day of practice, Stoops struggled with the Hawkeyes' fancy spring-loaded tackling dummies and could feel the doubtful eyes of his teammates and coaches bearing down on him as the players lined up for the inaugural Oklahoma drill. When his turn came, Stoops stepped up, charged a large running back at full speed and planted him on his back. By the time his teammates finished mobbing him in celebration, Stoops had been transformed, he says, from self-doubting to dominant. He went on to become a four-year starter at Iowa.

When he took over the Sooners in 1999, Stoops immediately reinstituted the drill. "I still remember that moment as being very important for me as a player," Stoops says. "This is a way to test unknowns. To a degree, it does connect us all. With this drill, you become a part of the group."

Somewhere along the line, though, the price of admission



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CRASH COURSE

The names differ, but the premise is the same: Line up and hit. These are just a few of the ways the Oklahoma drill has spread and changed over the past seven decades.

devolved into something far more dangerous than Wilkinson ever intended.

According to the 2013 book *League of Denial: The NFL, Concussions and the Battle for Truth*, in the 1970s the Steelers helped popularize a bloody, gladiator-style form of the Oklahoma they christened The Nutcracker. This head-to-head-collision interpretation became the norm in the NFL. At the 1981 Raiders camp, a rookie from Villanova named Howie Long was left battered, bloody and flat on his back by All-Pro blocker Art Shell. As the Raiders' veterans celebrated over his prostrate body, Long pulled himself to his feet, looked Shell in the eye and said, "Let's do it again." Long lost the drill but won over his teammates.

By the 1990s, however, salary caps and the risk of injury to high-paid athletes made the Oklahoma cost-prohibitive for most NFL teams. There are exceptions: In recent years, the Jaguars, Titans, Bengals and Falcons have been known to periodically dabble in the drill. The 2013 Bengals ran an especially gruesome version that allowed a 10-yard running head start; the drill quickly became a fan favorite. Just days later, coincidentally, the NFL agreed to pay nearly \$1 billion to settle the landmark concussion lawsuit brought by former players. Almost overnight, the seductive thrill of watching players collide like rams started to feel like a cringeworthy exercise in macho stupidity.

Yet while the NFL, for the most part, seems to have gotten the message, the Oklahoma remains as popular as ever in college. For every Dartmouth, where a coach like Buddy Teevens has minimized contact in practice, there are dozens of schools, such as Ohio State and LSU, that still run collision-heavy hitting drills. The Oklahoma was one of the first foundation-building drills Jim Harbaugh unpacked in Ann Arbor. And since taking over at Tennessee, Butch Jones has started many



HAMBURGER

In one pee wee version, players start on their backs and jump up at the whistle.



NUTCRACKER

The Steelers' 1970s one-on-one adaptation was so intense, fistfights erupted.



THUD

In this full-speed drill, contact is above the waist, and players stay on their feet.



BULL-IN-THE-RING

A favorite of Bear Bryant's: Players try to tackle, one by one, the teammate in the circle.



BIG CAT

Two players [no ball carrier] face off in this one-on-one hitting drill.

practices, including the Vols' recent spring scrimmage in front of 63,000 fans, with the Oklahoma and other hitting drills.

Chris Nowinski, a former Harvard defensive tackle who is now an advocate for player safety and the co-founder of the Sports Legacy Institute, recently received an anonymous cellphone video from a practice at a successful Division I program. At the beginning of the video, players are lined up a reasonable four yards apart. When the camera pans out, though, there's no ball carrier. Then the coach steps in and separates the combatants by several more yards, for no reason other than to increase the collision. The team goes crazy without realizing exactly what it's cheering for. "This is the definition of insanity," Nowinski says.

What's more troubling, however, is that the Oklahoma is still a mainstay among high school and pee wee players, who are most vulnerable to brain injuries. Nerve cells in children's brains lack the coating, insulation and protection found in adult brains. This not only makes kids more susceptible to concussions but also makes repeat concussions exponentially more dangerous. Kids also have disproportionately large, heavy heads and weaker necks that, compounded by the weight of a helmet, can hinder the control needed to avoid some concussions. This is why, in 2012, Pop Warner outlawed head-on tackling drills in which players started more than three yards apart.

"These little kids playing football and hitting like they're in the NFL?" says former NFL great Bo Jackson. "Their brains aren't even half-developed, and they're out tackling and getting concussions at 9 and 10 years old. ... And the parents are sitting up in the stands cheering? When this kid is turning 15 or 16 years old, this kid is not going to know his name, he's not going to know how to get home from school."

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The now-iconic drill has been passed down from Bud Wilkinson to Barry Switzer to Bob Stoops.

Yet in the South Carolina football hotbed of Rock Hill (population: 69,000), which has produced 11 NFL draft picks in the past 14 years, including Jadeveon Clowney, fans and families still line the football fields with lawn chairs, grills and coolers every August when the local YMCA youth teams hold Oklahoma Drill Night. The coaches, in fact, like to brag that the reason the fields are so lush is not from the rain but the tears (and at least one tooth) shed by players during the drill.

On one oven-hot August night last year, longtime coach Perry Sutton gathers his players, most of them between 7 and 10, near a whitewashed goalpost for a pre-drill pep talk. Struggling to be heard above a chorus of cicadas and a circling ice cream truck, Sutton reviews the importance of safe tackling by reminding the Sylvia Circle Demons of a high school kid who broke his neck in a similar drill. Although he doesn't mention him by name, it's likely Sutton is referring to Jaleel Gipson, a football player at Farmerville (Louisiana) High School who in 2013 broke a vertebra high in his neck during what coaches say was a routine rep in an Oklahoma-style drill. Gipson was declared brain-dead and died less than a week later after being taken off life support. Bengals tackle Andrew Whitworth, a Louisiana native, paid for Gipson's funeral three months before being subjected to the same drill himself.

"Everybody's better off if nobody does it," Nowinski says. "What we should be doing is rewarding and respecting coaches who say, 'We don't have to destroy each other in order to be men.'"

As the long shadows crawl across the field in Rock Hill, though, the crowd grows as the Demons run through dozens of Oklahoma drills. Some reps are little more than skinny kids in saggy football pants and bobblehead helmets harmlessly bouncing into each other. But very often, the cheering crowd, the hyped-up coaches

"WE SHOULD BE REWARDING COACHES WHO SAY, 'WE DON'T HAVE TO DESTROY EACH OTHER TO BE MEN.'"

PLAYER SAFETY ADVOCATE CHRIS NOWINSKI

and the inescapable contact produce the thunderous helmet crunch that has come to symbolize the Oklahoma drill's new rite of passage—into the debilitating dangers of football.

"You're gonna get lit up," a Demons assistant coach reassures his players as Oklahoma Drill Night ends. "But it will help you become a greater player. Or it will let you know football ain't for you."

FORTY-TWO MINUTES INTO the 2014 Sooners' first practice, Bell is still waiting to find out for himself. Stoops blows his whistle and, without raising his voice, says: "Oklahoma." Players race toward the dummies at midfield; they're teetering on a razor's edge, bouncing into each other, screaming through face masks and nearly coming to blows over matchups. "Oklahoma drill day is a football holiday every player looks forward to all year," says Eric Striker, the Sooners' All-Big 12 linebacker. "Every year somebody shrivels up, somebody blows up."

Bell steps through the crowd and puts his right hand in the dirt. When he looks up, crouched down across from him is linebacker Geneo Grissom, his good friend and a future third-round draft pick of the Patriots. Bell and Grissom exchange a knowing smile. There are no free passes, especially for former quarterbacks. At the whistle, Grissom shoots out low and hard, the crown of his helmet hitting Bell in the throat. The collision, which sounds like a baseball bat hitting a windshield, rocks Bell a bit. Grissom's legs are locked, but Bell keeps churning his feet, grinding away the linebacker's leverage. He stands him up, turns him and drives Grissom over the dummies and several yards into a crowd of stunned teammates. The running back dances through untouched.

After one final, declarative shove, Bell is swarmed with congratulatory chest bumps, high-fives and head-butts.

"You're not a quarterback anymore, Blake," yells someone from the crowd. "Now you're a football player." After practice, the giddy new tight end calls his dad with the news. "He was so excited," Mark says. "It sounded like the best thing he had ever done in his life."

It was close to it. Bell would go on to play only 12 games at tight end, collecting 16 catches for 214 yards and four TDs. But after his eye-popping performance at the NFL combine, he was selected in the fourth round of the 2015 NFL draft by the 49ers. With less than a year of experience, Bell transformed himself into the sixth tight end selected. Better still, this July, when he reported for his first day of training camp, his days in the gauntlet were behind him—along with those sleepless nights. Bell has reached the pinnacle: a level of the game where, finally, he's too valuable to be subjected to the Oklahoma drill. **E**

Additional reporting by Anna Katherine Clemmons

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Shouted Down There are trash-talkers in every sport, of every age and race. But as Nick Kyrgios recently found out, only certain types can get away with it.



Australian Nick Kyrgios didn't win Wimbledon. He didn't even make the quarterfinals, yet he was at the center of the tournament. His showstopping game, all aces and boom, was part of the reason. So too was his look—the diamonds in both ears, the mohawk with the dyed-blond wing, the Beats headphones—and his antics: the cockiness toward the chair umps and opponents; the temper in his victory over Canadian Milos Raonic, when he slammed his racket into the English grass and watched it bounce over the wall and land in the crowd.

Across the grounds, there was tinged debate over whether Kyrgios was bad for tennis, needed to mature, though he was no more demonstrative (and was less explosive) than fellow Aussie bad boy Bernard Tomic. In a passive-aggressive sport that doesn't want to admit that its players have transitioned into world-class athletes from country-club gentlemen, it wasn't the smack that drew the negativity but how Kyrgios packaged the smack. The pop star bling. The hip-hop smirk. The look-at-me embodiment of a selfie generation. The reactionary blowback reached its peak when Australian Olympic swimming champ Dawn Fraser told a TV show in their home country that Kyrgios, born to a Greek dad and Malaysian mom, and Tomic, of Croatian and Bosnian ancestry, should "go back to where their parents came from," a comment for which she later apologized. Others couldn't understand the criticism of Kyrgios. "Yes, I think he's great for tennis," John McEnroe told me. "The game needs some youth, some life, some fire. Could someone *please* tell me why that's such a bad thing?"

Expression and self-absorption collided years ago. Aaron Rodgers scores a touchdown and holds an imaginary championship belt around his waist. Tom Brady dodges his way for a first down, mimics the official signal for a first down like they all do, then butts heads with his teammates and calls the next play. When Novak Djokovic applauds an opponent's winning shot, it's never quite clear whether he is engaging in good sportsmanship or killing him with a middle finger of kindness. Go back to 1982, Cowboys-49ers. NFC championship game. Joe Montana is on the ground. Dwight Clark has just spiked The Catch. Too Tall Jones looks at Montana. "You just beat America's Team."

"Well, you can sit at home with the rest of America and watch the Super Bowl."

Mid-1980s, when he was kicking everybody's tail, Larry Bird torches Utah, looks at

Jazz coach Frank Layden and says, "Hey, Frank, haven't you got anyone on the bench who can guard me?" Then there was Michael Jordan, who talked trash to opponents and teammates. Yet a referendum on respect never centered on Jordan, nor Bird, Montana or Rodgers.

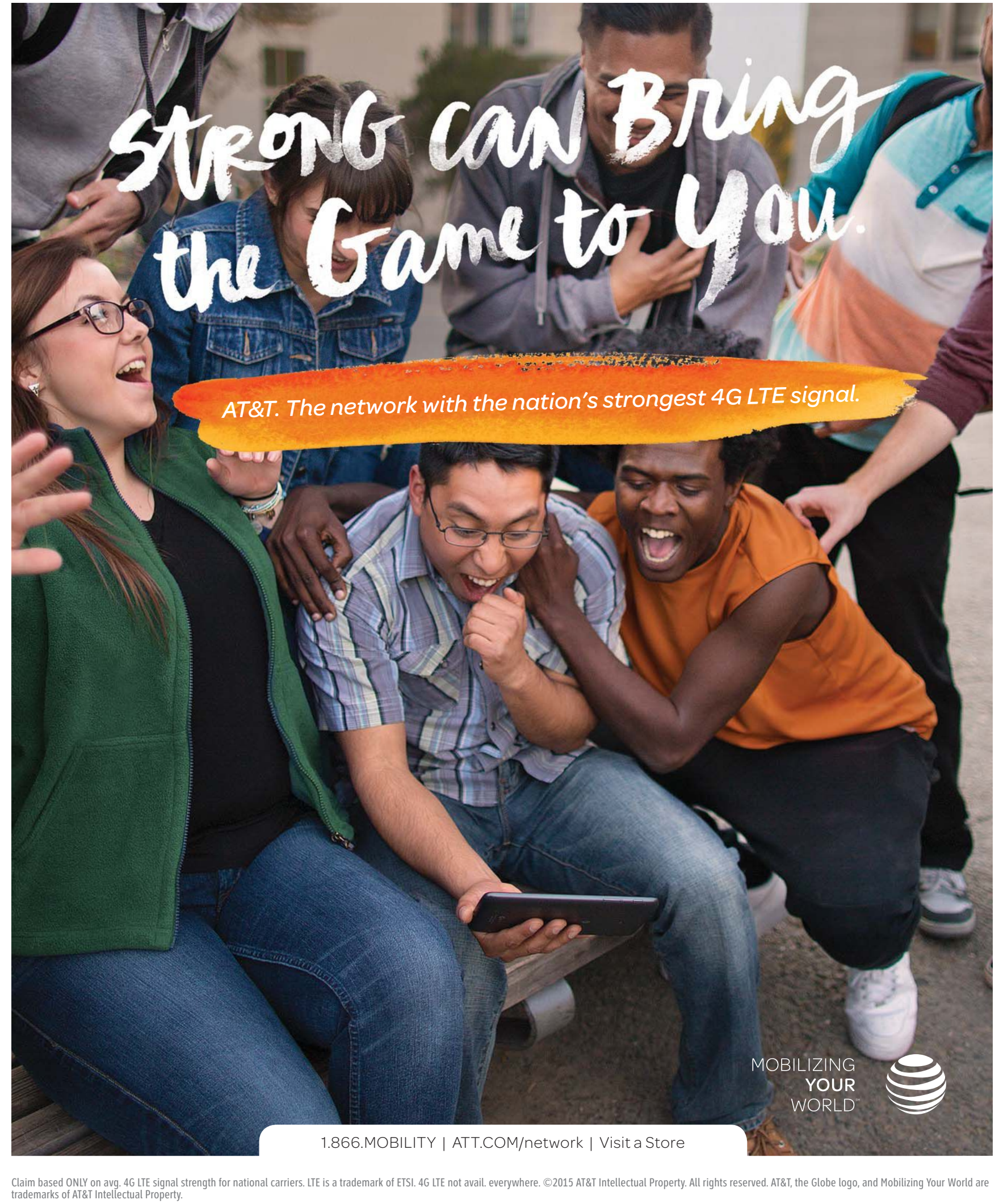
Confront the contradiction: Kyrgios' offense isn't the trash-talk but his specific embrace of black export—the music and style of hip-hop culture that has enveloped world youth culture. Black culture *is* youth culture. To accept Kyrgios' style is to legitimize the streets, the lower classes; his diamond-eared game threatens a long-cultivated image of respectability.

Among all sports, the NBA has best adapted to the culture of its athletes. Now tennis must adapt too, especially class-conscious Wimbledon, where even the courtesy cars were Jaguars. The battle over Kyrgios this year represents the cultural backlash to Generation Selfie: You must earn the right to rage, finger-wag, show off. McEnroe mostly got away with it because he won. Kyrgios can't because he has yet to win even a single tournament.

It is possible to respect the game and embrace one's generation, but the rules—for now—are fixed against Kyrgios. Jordan, wearing tailored suits postgame, could mouth off in a way that Allen Iverson, sporting tattoos and gold chains, could not. Bird disrespected his opponents but wasn't ostracized, because while he was from a poor background, the public identified his grit and grind as a white virtue. Kyrgios experienced the reality that to some segments of the public, black expression inherently disrespects the game.

Rules change, though. A quarter-century ago, it was a thing that Ken Griffey Jr.—horrors!—actually wore his cap backward during batting practice. The old guard fumed. The kids loved it.

Today no one remembers what the big deal was.



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